

# Curbing Academic Freedom in Japan

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**Abstract:** Signaling by politicians, bureaucrats, and educational administrators plays a key role in curbing academic freedom in Japan by highlighting taboo subjects and funding priorities. Structural constraints on autonomy, however, represent the most insidious threat to academic freedom. Neoliberal reforms enacted in Japan over the past two decades have compromised academic freedom and undermined university autonomy. Overall, under the pretext of reform, higher education has become more rigidly hierarchical while there is a chronic lack of diversity that fosters narrow groupthink. On Prime Minister Abe Shinzo’s watch, online harassment of academics surged while prominent revisionists targeted scholars over interpretations of wartime history.

**Keywords:** Academic Freedom; Educational Reform; Revisionists; Abe Shinzo; Online Harassment



**Figure 1:** Cover of *New Threats to Academic Freedom in Asia*, edited by Dimitar D. Gueorguiev and released by Columbia University Press in 2022.

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Compared to other countries in Asia, the threats to academic freedom in Japan may not seem especially severe. Scholars are not beaten, jailed, tortured, or killed for expressing their opinions as they are, for example, in China, India, Turkey, and Myanmar. Nevertheless, academic freedom in Japan is at risk because scholars do face marginalization and harassment for expressing their views on controversial issues such as Japan's wartime past. Although Japan enjoys a good international reputation as an advanced industrialized democracy, an Academic Freedom index published in 2020 by the Global Public Policy Institute placed Japan in the second tier of nations, along with Indonesia, but behind South Korea and Taiwan in tier one (Global Policy Institute 2021).

One key development in the region over the past decade is the role of social media and how netizens are mobilized to target dissent and curb freedom of expression through intimidation (Kingston 2019). This orchestration of online harassment targets scholars, journalists, and media organizations in campaigns of vilification and threats of violence.

In Japan, the government rewards scholars who do not make waves and tends to marginalize those who do, relying more on carrots than sticks. Academic freedom and freedom of expression are specifically protected in the Constitution, but that does not mean adequate protection for those who express dissenting or critical views about controversial issues. Signaling plays a crucial role in curbing academic freedom. Nobody needs to explicitly ban specific subjects or opinions, but everyone knows what will court retribution and marginalization.

In 2017, during one of many scandals that erupted during the Abe administration, the term *sontaku* (that is, 'carrying out unspoken orders') became a popular buzzword. In this case, officials covered up wrongdoing implicating Abe, anticipating this is what was implicitly expected, as a means of currying favor (Seig 2018). *Sontaku* depends on reading a situation, and responding appropriately, an artform in Japan that is intrinsic to the winnowing process. Someone who is unable to comprehend how they are expected to react is deemed *kuuki yomenai* (literally, 'unable to read the air'), with a connotation of cluelessness. Successful scholars are usually adept at reading the subtle signs and do not have to be told what is off-limits and know that there may be a cost to defiance. Academics and researchers who play the game well by embracing or endorsing government views are often dismissed as *goyogakusha* ('lapdog scholars'), but they enjoy the prestige of serving on government *shingikai* (advisory panels) and the privileged access this confers. Such postings can also boost promotion prospects and be financially rewarding. While *shingikai* are designed to give the impression that bureaucrats are crafting policies in consultation with scholars, the substantive role of these academics is more like window dressing, conferring legitimacy on decisions already taken (Slater and Danzuka 2015).

### **Revisionists Ascendant**

While threats to academic freedom in Japan are not new, the two Abe administrations (2006-7 and 2012-20) presented novel challenges. Beginning with his landmark 2006 Patriotic Education bill aimed at nurturing patriotism among students, Prime Minister Abe spearheaded assaults on academic freedom. In doing so, he advanced his longstanding agenda to overcome what he and other revisionist ideologues termed 'masochistic' history (Harris

2020: 55–58). After returning to power in 2012, Abe passed educational reforms in 2014 and 2015 that further tightened government and rightwing influence over secondary school textbook content (Koide 2014). Authors of these textbooks are now required to support official views on subjects such as territorial disputes and the comfort women. Moreover, local textbook committees lost their autonomy and became subject to far greater central government influence.

Textbooks are a key battleground for identity politics and disseminating what the government would like people to think and believe. The rightward shift in Japan’s political center of gravity in the twenty-first century is reflected in textbook content (Saaler 2016; Nozaki and Selden 2009). For example, by the late 1990s secondary school textbooks all covered the coercive recruitment of comfort women to serve in military brothels across Asia between 1932 and 1945, but now in all but one of the government-vetted texts for junior high school this issue is no longer covered at all. In 2015, the Minister of Education sparked further controversy when he met university presidents and urged them to play the anthem and raise the flag at entrance and graduation ceremonies (Kyodo News 2015a). There were concerns that non-compliance with the guidance might adversely influence future government funding. The anthem and flag are controversial because many Japanese object that they were used to mobilize support for pre-1945 militarism and imperialism and are symbols of that dark era (Repeta 2007).

In the twenty-first century, rightwing historical revisionists are taking off the gloves to stifle debate and promote their exculpatory and vindicating narrative about wartime Japan. Under Prime Ministers Abe and Suga Yoshihide (2020–21), the denialist camp was ascendant, portraying any criticism of revisionism (or Abe) as anti-Japanese. This is problematic on several levels, but given lukewarm support for Abe’s

signature policies on security, constitutional revision, nuclear energy, arms exports, etcetera, typically less than 25 per cent, labelling critics of Abe anti-Japanese implied that tens of millions of Japanese are anti-Japanese. This, despite the second Abe government’s vigorous support for the “Japan is Great” public relations campaign, aimed at boosting patriotism at home and positive vibes overseas (Yamaguchi 2017). While the campaign invited ridicule as heavy-handed propaganda, this does not diminish its impact on academic freedom and freedom of expression, because those who questioned or contested the campaign became targets of the rightwing media and were subject to orchestrated attacks by internet trolls. These campaigns of vilification make academics worry that what they write or say will provoke harassment.

### Structural Curbs

Edward Vickers (2020: 191) at Kyushu University argues that “chronic lack of diversity on Japanese campuses significantly impairs the meaningful exercise of academic freedom.” He then adds: “Reluctance among scholars to raise their heads above the proverbial parapet tends to be reinforced when the academic community is uniform, closed, and immobile” (Vickers 2020: 184). Echoing Hall (1997), he attributes the unwillingness of academics to challenge established norms and practices to a “closed shop” mentality that promotes intellectual conformity and uniformity in ethnicity, gender, and educational backgrounds. Women are underrepresented among professors and researchers and this marginalization—and exclusion of vital voices and input by what is commonly known as the OB (Old Boy) network of men from elite universities—denies them academic freedom. Similarly, the low percentage of foreign-born academics and researchers in Japan, and the frequently

precarious terms of their employment, further undermines academic freedom. Reportedly, foreign-trained Japanese academics are also sometimes subject to discriminatory treatment with similar consequences (personal communication with Edward Vickers, April 2021).

Academic freedom does not exist in a vacuum or some remote and unassailable ivory tower. Vickers (2020) highlights the nexus of political context and academic freedom. He maintains that the Liberal Democratic Party's (LDP) lock on political power has enabled it to advance its political agenda on education, arguing: "Most fundamentally, perhaps, the chronic lack of pluralism in Japanese politics complicates the task of mounting a sustained and forceful defense of academic freedom" (Vickers 2020: 188).

Under the banner of *jiko sekinin* ('self-responsibility'), LDP Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi (2001-6) enacted an array of neo-liberal reforms including higher education (Goodman 2013; Brazzill 2021; Ichiyama 2010). This meant, inter alia, budget cuts. Overall, funding for higher education in Japan is relatively low compared to other member nations of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), just 1.7 per cent of total public expenditure compared to the OECD average of 3 per cent (OECD 2018). As a result, many Japanese universities are financially strapped, a weakness that confers greater leverage on the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) because it decides funding allocations. Thus, despite heralding greater autonomy as a significant reform enacted in 2004, the government has increased its control over universities because they are competing for a shrinking pool of government subsidies that has been cut by 1 per cent annually since then (Vickers 2020: 190). Morozumi (2019) found that government grants for operating expenses decreased from 48 per cent of the

total in 2004 to 34 per cent by 2013, resulting in staff cuts and increasing the administrative workload of professors. As a result, there is less time, funds, and incentive to engage in research.

As Vickers (2020: 190) argues: "The main thrust of university reform has been to enhance institutional autonomy from direct government regulation on the one hand while on the other deploying mechanisms of accountability to retain or even enhance ministerial control." In so far as this 2004 reform effectively transformed "these institutions from wholly owned off-shoots of the ministry into independent entities", it was "ostensibly liberalizing". However, universities "were still required to seek permission from the central bureaucracy to establish new departments or programs, to vary their student quotas, or to increase their fees" (Vickers 2020: 190). MEXT had also worked to enhance the authority of the president and central administration vis-à-vis faculty councils and subjected them to enhanced and intrusive bureaucratic oversight (Morozumi 2019). Thus, the chimera of reform served as a smokescreen for increased MEXT control over universities and sidelined faculty from decision-making in the process (Kakuchi 2021).

As Sophia University's Koichi Nakano elaborates:

Another way in which academic freedom is undermined is by taking away the autonomy of the universities. Through the revision, decision-making power within the university has become centralized in the hands of the President, at the same time as the President's election process was changed to a selection process that is largely controlled by a board (that includes a large number of businesspeople and government henchmen) —along the lines of a corporate model. You probably have

come across allegations of foul play recently in relation to the selection of the Presidents at universities of Tokyo and Tsukuba etc. Many private universities (including Sophia) moved in the same direction, and the President is no longer elected, and the faculty meetings are no longer decision-making bodies. Business interests as well as government policy are better heeded as a result (Interview March 2021).

In Vickers' view,

The most significant curbs on academic freedom are actually structural rather than directly political. The way the system transforms most full professors into full-time bureaucrats (rather than researchers); the chronic lack of diversity (fostering narrow groupthink); rigidly hierarchical governance. The use of funding to constrain academic freedom is certainly very significant. Maybe this happens less through withholding of funding from controversial topics (though many Japanese colleagues believe that certain topics are off-limits - and that belief itself leads to self-censorship) (interview, March 2021).

He then adds: "I think it is more a case of the Ministry and universities themselves increasingly signaling to faculties where the main funding opportunities lie, and therefore to which fields or topics research efforts should be directed" (interview, March 2021).

This signaling has stirred a backlash as Sawa Takamitsu, former president of Shiga University and columnist for *The Japan Times*, wrote a scathing op-ed about the education

minister's proposal to slash support for the humanities and social sciences. In June 2015, "all presidents of national universities received a notice from the education minister telling them to either abolish their undergraduate departments and graduate schools devoted to the humanities and social sciences or shift their curricula to fields with greater utilitarian values" (Sawa 2015). This sweeping purge did not happen but is indicative of the LDP's educational agenda.

### **Propaganda, Intimidation, and Cooptation**

The rightwing Fuji Sankei media conglomerate has waged an aggressive campaign against liberals and academic freedom. For example, the flagship Sankei newspaper has been critical of the Science Council of Japan and supportive of Prime Minister Suga's 2020 unprecedented decision to reject the appointment of six scholars because they criticized former Prime Minister Abe's security legislation and state secrecy law (Sankei Editorial Board 2020). This advisory body is a low-profile organization that was established back in 1949 to offer the government independent views as a remedy to the groupthink that prevailed in wartime Japan. It is "a 'special organization' under the jurisdiction of the Prime Minister, operating independently of the government, for the purpose of promoting and enhancing the field of science, and having science reflected in and permeated into administration, industries and people's lives" (Science Council of Japan undated). The Science Council also angered the government by calling for universities not to accept research-funding for dual use technologies, modelled on the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) in the United States, that might be used for military purposes (Communication from Suzuki Tatsujiro, Nagasaki University, March 2020). Many universities have rejected this offer of government funding and discouraged their

researchers from applying.

The Science Council is supposed to be free from political intervention, but Suga's veto of the six scholars critical of the Abe government (in which Suga served as chief cabinet secretary) was widely condemned as a political vendetta. When confronted with this allegation, Suga denied doing so and said: "There are things I can explain, and things I can't" (Mainichi 2021). The *Mainichi* newspaper pilloried him, asserting in an editorial that "administrative bodies should not be allowed to carry out actions they cannot explain to the public. Accountability is the foundation of democratic politics" (Mainichi 2021). Ironically, polls showed that most Japanese shared the scholars' criticisms of Abe's initiatives on security and transparency (Kyodo News 2015b).

In Japan, *kakenhi* (grants-in-aid for scientific research) are crucial sources of MEXT funding for academics. They sometimes submit proposals that camouflage their intended research projects, knowing that certain topics are less likely to get funded, while others engage in self-censorship by shifting their research to mesh with stated funding priorities because securing a grant scores points with university administrators. Although academics conducting critical research on sensitive topics such as war responsibility, comfort women, Korean colonial history, and forced labor sometimes get funded, they are subject to public condemnation. The *Sankei* newspaper, for example, ensured that its readers knew what taboo topics some academics were researching and how much taxpayer money they were "squandering" to "tarnish" Japan's reputation (Sankei Editorial Board 2018).

As Sophia University's Koichi Nakano explains, "Another example of funding related attack on academic freedom is what is called 'Kakenhi-bashing'—the dog-whistle attacks launched by Sugita Mio (LDP Diet member) among others

on what they regarded as scholar-activists, like Yamaguchi Jiro and Okano Yayo. Professor Okano's group was singled out for attack by Sugita in the Diet and on Twitter as an 'anti-Japan' project using public funds (*kakenhi*) to damage Japan's national interest by engaging in 'fabrication' of the comfort women issue" (interview, March 2021).

Nakano and his former MA student Mikine Dezaki were subject to sustained vilification and threats of lawsuits by a rightwing group led by Fujioka Nobukatsu that filed a complaint with Sophia University asserting violation of ethical research guidelines. Nakano was the academic supervisor of Dezaki's thesis project, the documentary *Shusenjo* about the comfort women. In this film, Dezaki interviews several prominent revisionists and juxtaposes their lengthy comments with scholars who have worked to disinter this saga of sexual slavery and human rights violations. Dezaki presents both sides of the controversy, but the revisionists make factually challenged assertions, racist comments, and demonstrate an unfamiliarity with the extensive published research on the topic. In the film they go on at length, so it is not as if the editing made them out to be charlatans, but that is the impression they conveyed. Sophia University conducted "an extended (more than a year-long) research ethics investigation process that concluded in December 2020—confirming that there was no research ethics violation of any kind, but during the course of the university investigation, Fujioka and other revisionists organized rallies, disseminated documents to Sophia professors, petitioned with the government, published articles, maintained a website, and spread (dis)information on SNS etcetera" (confidential communication from an employee of Sophia University). While Nakano and Dezaki were vindicated and apparently remain undeterred, scholars came to understand the risks of exercising academic freedom.

Dezaki also endured a two and a half-year

judicial ordeal that ended in January 2022 when the Tokyo district court ruled against the revisionist plaintiffs who had sued him and his film distributor to ban screenings of the film and demand for JPY 13 million (about US\$100,000) in compensation. However, Dezaki must pay the legal expenses for his defense, so exoneration has been costly. Problematically, he warns that, “this makes it easy to silence people by bogging them down in legal fees” (personal communication, February 2022). Oddly, the domestic media was silent on the court ruling in favor of freedom of expression despite extensive coverage of the controversial film since it was released in 2018. Dezaki laments that: “Unfortunately, because of the lack of coverage of our win, the attempt to discredit the film may have been successful, as in the minds of many Japanese, the film will be remembered as the troublesome film that got sued rather than the film that won the lawsuit against attempts to silence it” (personal communication, February 2022).

Some scholars assert that they have considerable leeway about what they publish, even on sensitive historical subjects, so long as the research is solid, and they do not promote their publications on social media or in mainstream media. Openly advocating avoidance of public discourse and engagement is not a ringing endorsement for academic freedom. Of course, this is sensible advice because the threats are real and disruptive. Indeed, many Japan-based scholars I contacted for this project did not want to be named or quoted, commenting only on a background basis while others refrained from comment out of caution. After thinking it over, a few even withdrew their comments, worried about getting on the wrong radar screen.

### **Online Harassment**

Since 2015, a number of academics in the United States have been subject to disruptive

freedom of information requests from a Japan-based American professor regarding all their emails pertaining to their research projects about Japan, focusing on the comfort women (personal communication, January 2022). In a prolonged harassment of Alexis Dudden, Professor of History at the University of Connecticut (UConn), this advocate for historical revisionism made numerous requests for her emails regarding the comfort women and filed a complaint in mid-2021 alleging that UConn was not in compliance with the state’s Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). However, in January 2022, he failed to show up for the public hearing scheduled to review his complaint, and the case was dismissed.

At the same time, he withdrew his similar FOIA requests targeting Professor Jinhee Lee at Eastern Illinois University. She says that having to comb through some 4,000 emails within a week at the busiest time of the semester compromised her ability to do her job. In her view, “The sheer number and frequency of his frivolous and vindictive FOIA against scholars with the charge of international conspiracy is appalling and unacceptable” (personal communication, January 2022). She then adds: “The academic institutions and global community must learn the low tactics his sort of guys are employing in their desperate attempts to cover up the historical truth.” Timothy Webster, a law professor at the University of New England, circulated an online petition in support of Dudden, warning that such “vexatious” FOIA requests, “... would disclose her contacts with activists, scholars and others who work on politically sensitive topics, which may cause them to refrain from free discussion and exchange of ideas for fear of harassment. It would send a message, to Professor Dudden and the broader academic community, that politically sensitive research may lead to unwarranted scrutiny, intimidation, obloquy, and perhaps even litigation. It also serves little public purpose” (personal communication, January 2022).

Public universities in the United States require disclosure of emails and the burden is on the professors to review their emails and decide what is shared or not, and to spend endless hours with university administrators and lawyers in handling such requests. Being subject to such harassment not only drains time and energy, but also sends a chilling message to researchers in the field about what they research and how they communicate about it. Paula Curtis, a historian of pre-modern Japan at the University of California Los Angeles, explains that, “those who became targets of these right wing circles experienced a wide variety of online harassment as the *neto uyo* [rightwing internet activists] dug through our online media profiles and professional pages (screencapping and sharing them), tweeted at our employers and funders calling us racists spreading hate speech, gleefully declared that anyone who blocked them was no scholar, as we ‘ran away’ instead of engaging in discussion. Some of us received hate mail, some of us death threats. The worst of the harassment was reserved for female researchers” (Curtis 2021). This is not only repugnant behavior, but also a clear infringement on academic freedom.

## Conclusion

Signaling by politicians, bureaucrats, and educational administrators plays a key role in curtailing academic freedom in Japan by highlighting taboo subjects and funding priorities. Structural constraints on autonomy, however, represent the most insidious threat to academic freedom in the country today. Neoliberal reforms enacted in Japan over the past two decades have compromised academic freedom and undermined university autonomy. Overall, under the pretext of reform, higher education has become more rigidly hierarchical as presidents have become more powerful and insulated from faculty governance, professors

have been transformed into bureaucrats spending more time on filling out forms and navigating red tape than conducting research, while there is a chronic lack of diversity that fosters narrow groupthink.

Although intended as a compliment, President Donald Trump’s chief campaign strategist Steve Bannon made the damning assertion in 2019 that “PM Abe was Trump before Trump” (Nakano 2019). Abe came to power in 2013 promising to “Take Back Japan”, his version of Trump’s ‘Make America Great Again’, slogans that empowered rightwing activists in both countries. Like Trump, Abe never disavowed these extremists or condemned their threats of violence and tried to muzzle liberal media outlets (Kingston 2017). The odious trend of online intimidation, threats of violence and intolerance is one of the toxic legacies of the Abe era. However, this thuggish campaign has not eradicated dissent or critical discourse, as many academics continue to publish research about sensitive topics and weigh in on public debates. The sense of being under siege has also generated a backlash of solidarity among academics in support of academic freedom (Lau 2020). Thus, rightwing efforts to curb academic freedom in Japan are hotly contested and have been counterproductive, projecting a glowering and intolerant nationalism inconsistent with Japan’s avowed commitment to shared universal values.

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