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CONTESTING ACADEMIC FREEDOM IN JAPAN

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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 or the Fukushima nuclear disaster. 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, alongside Indonesia but behind South Korea and Taiwan, which were in tier one.¹

The key takeaway from Kinzelbach's overview of the region in the preceding chapter is that academics in Asia have long endured curbs on academic freedom, and these have not abated. Despite democratization and the end of civil wars, hopes for improvement in civil liberties, the freedom of expression, and academic freedom confront the grim reality of widespread, ongoing repression. Glimmers of reform in Asian polities notwithstanding, academics confront democratic backsliding and the recrudescence of authoritarian practices that impinge on freedom of expression. Kinzelbach also draws our attention to the recent downward trend in academic freedom related to political issues across the region, including in Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, Hong Kong, India, Pakistan, the Philippines, South Korea, and Thailand. This trend is corroborated by the

qualitative research presented in this volume and my own fieldwork across the region over the past four decades, but the list should also include Japan (as detailed below), Singapore (see George et al. in chapter 4) and Indonesia (see Nugroho in chapter 6).

One key development in the region over the past decade is the role of social media and the way that netizens are mobilized to target dissent and curb freedom of expression through intimidation.² This orchestration of online harassment is also ubiquitous in Japan, where scholars, journalists, and media organizations are subject to campaigns of vilification and threats of violence.³ For example, the 2022 Netflix drama *The Journalist* draws on a sweetheart land deal scandal that engulfed the second Abe Shinzō government (2006–2007; 2012–2020) and highlights how the prime minister’s office sought to suppress the story and discredit the investigative reporter by mounting social media campaigns that used fabricated accounts to whip up an online frenzy.⁴ As discussed below, academics have also been subjected to such tactics.

Japan’s constitution specifically protects academic freedom (Article 23) and the freedom of expression (Article 21), but that doesn’t mean that those who protest state policy or express dissenting or critical views about controversial issues can rely on such protections, subject as they are to judicial interpretation and a political context that is favorable to limiting such rights.⁵ Yet scholars often criticize the government on a range of issues in their essays, interviews, social media posts, and public comments, as is natural in a democracy. For example, in 2015, three constitutional scholars invited by the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) testified in the Diet (Japan’s legislature) that Abe’s proposed security legislation was unconstitutional; they were accompanied by a petition supporting their view that was signed by a vast majority of their peers.⁶ This was humiliating for Abe, but he ignored the scholars’ opinion, and the legislation was passed, and nobody went to jail for speaking out. Instead, the Japanese government tends to reward scholars who don’t make waves and to marginalize or ignore those who do, relying more on carrots than sticks.

Signaling plays a crucial role in curbing academic freedom. Scholars know what topics and views are risky, and some act accordingly. 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* became a popular buzzword. In this case, apparently on their own initiative, officials covered up wrongdoing that implicated Abe as a means of currying favor, anticipating this was what was implicitly expected.⁷ *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 an inability to read the air), which has a connotation of cluelessness. Scholars who are adept at reading the subtle signs and who don't have to be told what is off-limits can enjoy the benefits of government support. Academics and researchers who play the game well by embracing or endorsing government views are often dismissed by critics 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. Political scientist Tsurutani Taketsugu criticized this compromised and entrenched "culture of academia," asserting that it undermines trust in those who are involved, along with their findings and policy recommendations.⁸ While *shingikai* are designed to give the impression that bureaucrats are crafting policies in consultation with scholars, the substantive role of these academics is typically more like window dressing, conferring legitimacy on decisions that have already been made.⁹

Revisionists Ascendant

While threats to academic freedom in Japan are not new, the two Abe administrations presented new challenges. Beginning with his landmark Patriotic Education bill in 2006, which was aimed at nurturing patriotism among students, Prime Minister Abe spearheaded assaults on academic freedom. In doing so, he advanced his long-standing agenda to overcome what he and other revisionist ideologues termed "masochistic" history.¹⁰ After returning to power in 2012, Abe passed educational reforms in 2014 and 2015 that further tightened government and right-wing influence over secondary school textbook content.¹¹ Authors of these textbooks are now required to support official views on subjects such as territorial disputes and comfort women. Moreover, local textbook committees lost their autonomy and became the subject of far greater central government influence.

Textbooks are a key battleground for identity politics and for projecting sanctioned views of 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.¹² For example, by the late 1990s, all secondary school textbooks 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. This national government intervention in school textbooks is matched by local government requirements that secondary teachers and students must stand and sing the national anthem facing the flag. The controversy over such requirements reached a flashpoint in 2004, when hundreds of public-school teachers resisted the Tokyo Metropolitan Government's orders to stand and sing. Teachers challenged

these orders in court, but they were ultimately upheld by Japan's Supreme Court, so the mandate remains in place. 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.¹³ There were concerns that noncompliance 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.¹⁴

In the twenty-first century, right-wing historical revisionists are taking off their gloves to stifle debate and promote their exculpatory and vindicating narrative about wartime Japan. Under Abe and Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide (2020–21), the denialist camp has been ascendant, portraying any criticism of revisionism (or Abe) as anti-Japanese. This is problematic on several levels, but given the lukewarm support for Abe's signature policies on security, constitutional revision, nuclear energy, arms exports, and other issues (which is typically less than 25 percent), labeling the critics of Abe as anti-Japanese implied that tens of millions of Japanese are anti-Japanese. Responding to this limited public support for his agenda, the Abe government launched the "Japan is Great" public relations campaign, which was aimed at boosting patriotism at home and creating positive vibes overseas.¹⁵ While this campaign invited ridicule as heavy-handed propaganda, this doesn't diminish its impact on academic freedom and freedom of expression because those who questioned or contested the campaign became targets of the right-wing media and were subjected 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 at Kyushu University argues that "chronic lack of diversity on Japanese campuses significantly impairs the meaningful exercise of academic freedom."¹⁶ He 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."¹⁷ 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 background.¹⁸ Women are underrepresented among professors and researchers, and this marginalization, along with the 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 subjected to discriminatory treatment with similar consequences.¹⁹

Academic freedom doesn't exist in a vacuum or some remote and unassailable ivory tower. Vickers highlights the nexus of political context and academic freedom.²⁰ He maintains that the LDP's 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."²¹

Under the banner of *jiko sekinen* (self-responsibility), LDP Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi (2001–2006) enacted an array of neoliberal reforms, including some that were related to higher education.²² 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); it is just 1.7 percent of total public expenditures compared to the OECD average of 3 percent.²³ 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 that was 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 percent annually since then.²⁴ Morozumi found that government grants for operating expenses decreased from 48 percent of the total in 2004 to 34 percent by 2013, resulting in staff cuts and an increased administrative workload for professors.²⁵ As a result, there is less time, funding, and incentives to engage in research. Tax regulations impede the development of university endowments, and there are constraints on borrowing, ensuring that the cuts in operating grants have a significant impact.

Another arrow in the quiver of subordination is the custom of *amakudari* (descent from heaven), the long-established practice of retiring bureaucrats gaining sinecures in organizations that were once under their regulatory purview. *Amakudari* was justified as a back channel for communication between the government and the private sector, a way to informally convey government concerns and priorities. However, this long-standing system was deemed a hotbed of unethical practices, and finally, the government outlawed it in 2007. Even so, it emerged in 2016 that legal sanction had not prevailed over established practice.²⁶ MEXT officials were parachuting into university jobs that had been arranged by former officials, a clever way to sustain the praxis without violating the letter of the law. It was hard for universities to refuse these arrangements given how dependent they are on the discretionary budgetary powers of ministry officials. Research funds, the establishment of new departments, subsidies, student numbers, and

more are all subject to ministry approval. These retired officials were able to informally advise university presidents and key administrators about MEXT concerns and thus influence decision-making that potentially compromised academic freedom.

Amakudari reinforced the informal central government influence over universities that accompanied the 2004 corporatization of universities that ostensibly gave them greater autonomy. As Vickers 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.”²⁷ Insofar as this 2004 reform effectively transformed “these institutions from wholly owned offshoots 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.”²⁸ 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.²⁹ Thus, the chimera of reform served as a smokescreen for increased MEXT control over universities, and it sidelined faculty from decision-making in the process.³⁰

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.³¹

A law professor explained, “The more cynical view would be that it meant there was a single person in universities that the government had to squeeze in order to get things done. This change might have made sense for public universities, but it was imposed on private universities as well. The only reason would be to ensure the control was uniform across all institutions.”³²

He added:

the greater threats to the substance of academic research come not in the form of content-related mandates/sanctions, but in structural designs affecting what institutions can do and how they do it . . . there is an elaborate regime for what law subjects may be taught, how they are taught and how performance is evaluated that has a tremendous impact on content. The government essentially establishes a model curriculum based on what it thinks people need to know to sit for the bar exam, which sort of makes sense, but it puts the government in the position of mandating what areas of constitutional law and administrative law should be covered.

In his view, “It is basically impossible for law professors in this regime to teach alternative views or stray into areas that they think are interesting or important but are outside the bar exam orthodoxy. It is profoundly anti-intellectual but is driven primarily by structures rather than specific content requirements.”

Vickers also draws attention to how the government imposed drastic cuts in resources for research-focused work on Education and steering of resources instead towards teacher training. This shift in allocations followed the 2016 government assault on humanities and social sciences, asserting that these faculties should serve “social needs” (as defined by the government) to justify their receipt of taxpayers’ money. Education Departments at most national universities have come under significantly greater pressure to reorient themselves towards training teachers to serve the government’s educational agenda, rather than analyzing and critiquing that agenda itself.³³

In Vickers’s 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 group-think); 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).³⁴

Regarding the use of funding to influence research agendas, Vickers 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. At least within my own department, discussions about departmental strategy nowadays seem to be conducted entirely with reference to the latest directives from MEXT, and how we should respond in order to please officialdom and the university higher-ups.³⁵

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."³⁶ This sweeping purge didn't happen but is indicative of the LDP's educational agenda.

Radiation Monitoring

In a series entitled "The Prometheus Trap," the *Asahi* newspaper details the 2011 decision by the Japanese government to curtail the academic freedom of researchers monitoring radiation following the Fukushima nuclear accident.³⁷ On March 31, 2011, Aoyama Michio, a respected researcher at the Meteorological Research Institute (MRI) of the Japan Meteorological Agency, was instructed to discontinue the world's longest radiation monitoring program. This was a program that began in 1957, prompted by the 1954 US thermonuclear test in the Bikini Atoll that doused the Lucky Dragon fishing vessel with heavy amounts of radiation, sickening the Japanese crew and tainting the tuna onboard. Over the subsequent five decades, the MRI monitored environmental radiation in the atmosphere and oceans, the longest continuously running such program. Abruptly, Aoyama was informed that the budget for radiation monitoring would cease at the beginning of the new fiscal year, just one day after receiving notice. It seemed to be a strange order just a few weeks after the 2011 Fukushima meltdowns and at a time when radiation readings were at their highest since the program began. Ostensibly, MEXT decided to redirect the budget due to the nuclear accident at the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant, maintaining that the situation required *emergency* radiation monitoring. Aoyama probed into the decision and was told that the meteorological agency had informed MEXT it didn't need the budget. The agency official who had agreed to the budget reallocation maintains that he interpreted the phone call from MEXT requesting his approval on the last day of the fiscal year as tantamount to an order to stop MRI radiation observations, apparently a case of *sontaku*—listening between the lines and acting according to implied but unstated preferences. Undeterred, Aoyama and various colleagues quietly continued collecting samples on their own. In the days after the nuclear accident,

radiation readings had surged to unprecedented levels, so the researchers believed this was a crucial time to continue their work, even if the budget was eliminated.

In April 2011, Aoyama planned to submit a coauthored paper to the prestigious *Nature* magazine. One coauthor was Ken Buesseler, a renowned chemical oceanographer at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution in Massachusetts, while the other was Fukasawa Masao, a researcher at the Japan Agency for Marine-Earth Science and Technology (JAMSTEC). The draft paper, focusing on the impact radioactive releases from Fukushima Daiichi were having on the ocean's marine environment, was completed on April 18, and *Nature* wanted to publish it. The authors found that weeks after the nuclear accident, levels of cesium-137 remained exceptionally high just offshore Fukushima's stricken reactors, a finding with startling implications. Aoyama received approval to publish from his immediate superior, but Kano Yuji, the director general of the MRI, subsequently made permission contingent on sweeping revisions, including cutting any comparisons with Chernobyl. In this meeting, Kano, an administrator lacking a background as a science researcher, said, "Experts may be able to read the data correctly, but the mass media? I wouldn't put it past them to take the data out of context and just overlay the part about the Fukushima disaster polluting the sea 10,000 times worse than Chernobyl."³⁸ Aoyama replied, "Our numbers are correct. They are based on data disclosed by Tokyo Electric Power Co. and the science and technology ministry. It is a fact that the sea has been polluted severely."³⁹ The decision to withhold permission to publish the paper was not on scientific grounds; it was rationalized in terms of public relations concerns and fears that the media would stoke public anxieties by sensationalizing the findings. Following this bureaucratic intervention, Aoyama and his colleagues were forced to maintain a low profile and refrain from public comments. The *Nature* paper remained in limbo because the magazine would not proceed without Aoyama obtaining permission to publish, even if he withdrew his name as an author. Subsequently, at the Japan Radioisotope Association's 2011 conference, an emergency session was convened on the environmental impact of Fukushima, but Aoyama's superiors made excuses about why the nation's leading expert on the subject could not give a presentation. At the event, another scientist presented Aoyama's findings while he watched. The muzzling of Aoyama continued as his scheduled participation in a two-week, joint Japan-U.S. radiation survey in the sea off Fukushima was nixed. However, political intervention turned the tables. Acting on a tip, Mori Yuko, an upper house legislator from the then-ruling Democratic Party of Japan, visited the MRI, where Aoyama briefed her. Suddenly, funding was restored, and the MRI began streaming radiation dispersion information. In October, Aoyama's coauthored paper that had been vetoed in April was finally published in a lower-profile magazine, *Environmental Science & Technology*, in October. But the matter didn't end there. MEXT initiated an investigation into

what institutes and researchers had helped Aoyama continue collecting data after the budget was cut. The 2012 *Asahi* “Prometheus” articles detailing this drama had drawn unwanted attention and a desire for retribution.⁴⁰

The fundamental reason for blocking Aoyama’s *Nature* paper was the concern that it might alarm the public. But the plumes of radiation released by the hydrogen explosions at Fukushima, which were played over and over on television, had already put the nation on edge. When Emperor Akihito gave a nationally televised address on March 16, his words of encouragement could not counter the troubling symbolism; his rare appearance suggested that the situation was far worse than anyone in authority was admitting. While international news programs were highlighting the nuclear accident, the domestic media was cooperating with the government to downplay the severity, and it did not report the reactor meltdowns until late in May 2011. Under pressure from the ad giant Dentsu, television stations excluded commentators who were known for their critical views about nuclear energy and skepticism about nuclear safety.⁴¹ Subsequently, the media acknowledged it had been complicit in the cover-up. Some organizations, including *Asahi*, sought to regain credibility by publishing investigative reports that exposed what the “nuclear village” (*genshiroku-mura*) of pro-nuclear organizations and individuals in government, politics, business, and finance wanted to hide.⁴²

Aoyama’s article was too damning, too soon. He argued that there was an overriding public interest in disseminating reliable information about the extent of radiation released by the accident, and this would be the most effective weapon against rumormongering, but the problem was that his findings were consistent with reactor meltdowns. Weeks after the accident, the levels of radiation in the ocean adjacent to Fukushima Daiichi were not abating. This meant that there was an ongoing release of radiation into the ocean, because otherwise, the level would recede as ocean currents dispersed it. Burying his findings was necessary to dispel concerns about meltdowns and the far larger risk to the environment and public health than the government was acknowledging. It is a clear case where academic freedom was held hostage to the vested interests of the influential nuclear village. Aoyama was denied his academic freedom for questioning authority and subverting the official narrative. His decision to continue radiation monitoring despite the clear signals to desist is a testament to his principled stand. In the end, although they never thanked him for doing so, he spared the government the global humiliation that would have ensued if the world’s longest continuous radiation monitoring program was suspended during the Fukushima crisis over an imaginary budget crisis.

Nuclear Taboos

Suzuki Tatsujiro, a leading specialist on nuclear energy at Nagasaki University, recalls that his study that was critical of Japan's nuclear fuel cycle policy for the Central Research Institute of Electric Power Industry (CRIEPI), a nonprofit research institute sponsored by nine large electric utilities, drew heavy criticism. He says the president of CRIEPI was supportive, "but advised me not to continue my research on this particular issue (he himself was threatened by the utilities)."⁴³ He also believes the utilities blocked the publication of a paper written by a study group he participated in between 2002 and 2003 that criticized the Rokkasho nuclear fuel reprocessing plant at a time when the government was evaluating the plant's viability due to delays and cost overruns. Currently, over two decades past the original deadline, Rokkasho has not reprocessed any nuclear fuel despite some \$22 billion of government funding.

NHK, Japan's public broadcaster, usually aligns with government perspectives in part because it depends on Diet funding and approval. This institutionalized deference is useful for the government because controlling the narrative on controversial issues is key, and NHK commands the largest audience share for its evening news programs. At the end of 2013, Abe appointed Momii Katsuto, who had no previous media experience, as the director general of NHK. At his first press conference in 2014, Momii downplayed the comfort women issue and told reporters, "When the government says 'right' we can't say 'left.'"⁴⁴ Subsequently, an NHK insider divulged the use of the "Orange Book," a stylesheet for NHK's international broadcasting arm, NHK World. This included approved euphemisms for sensitive topics—for example, mentioning how the Fukushima nuclear reactors suffered "core damage" rather than meltdowns. In fact, the Fukushima reactors met the criteria for being designated as meltdowns, as it was widely reported in the international media soon after the accident, but core damage was deemed less inflammatory. At a book launch on *Press Freedom in Japan* hosted at Temple University Japan (TUJ) in 2017, one of the authors referred to this Orange Book and the censorship it entailed, giving some examples of misleading euphemisms that deliberately obscured the issues.⁴⁵ This author was a journalist and adjunct professor who worked part-time at an NHK subsidiary. He was asked to take down the TUJ event video that was posted on YouTube, pressuring him to censor discussion of NHK's censorship or face the consequences. As a result, he lost his job for not censoring on NHK's behalf. Rather than informing the public, NHK was fudging the truth on Fukushima in ways that were similar to its use of euphemisms and its endorsement of government positions downplaying the Nanjing Massacre, the comfort women system, and other historical disputes. For scholars working on such subjects, the NHK endorsement of revisionist views of history promoted by Abe and embraced by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) sends a clear

message.⁴⁶ Whether people modify their research, however, depends on the individual and what they are prepared to risk, be it funding, an appointment to a government advisory council, or an honorary award.

After the 3/11 nuclear meltdowns, Azby Brown, then a professor at Kanazawa Institute of Technology (KIT), launched Safecast, a volunteer organization that collects radiation readings from volunteers across Japan and posts radiation maps on its website. The Japanese public was skeptical about government data, and thus, Safecast provided an alternative, trusted source of radiation data for a nation that was anxious about health risks. This crowdsourcing of readings, and Brown's work as the lead researcher at Safecast, drew considerable media attention in both Japan and overseas, and it featured KIT as Brown's institutional affiliation. In addition, many researchers access the data and cite it in their publications. In general, university administrations appreciate it when faculty give media interviews and help raise a school's institutional profile, the more so when such institutions are otherwise not prominent. The official retirement age at KIT is sixty, but it is established practice to continue employing professors until age sixty-five. In Brown's case, however, he was not given an extension, and there was no reason given for this exceptional treatment of a productive and respected scholar who was known for his expertise on architecture, design, and the environment. The administration only paid him a small monthly stipend of ¥100,000 (\$900 USD) for five years, a fraction of what his salary would have been. Brown describes this as "hush" money and suspects that the private university's conservative owner was unhappy with his radiation monitoring work.⁴⁷ Universities across Japan have financial problems, and KIT is no exception, but he doubts that money was the issue in this case.

Propaganda, Intimidation, and Co-optation

The right-wing 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 unprecedented 2020 decision to reject the appointment of six scholars because they criticized Abe's security legislation and state secrecy law.⁴⁸ 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."⁴⁹ The Science Council also angered the government by calling for universities not to accept research funding for dual-use technologies, modeled on the Defense Advanced

Research Projects Agency (DARPA) in the US, that might be used for military purposes.⁵⁰ Many universities have rejected this offer of government funding and discouraged their researchers from applying. Pugwash Japan, a member of the global Pugwash network advocating for the elimination of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction, criticized Suga's decision as an infringement on the independence of the Science Council and academic freedom overall.⁵¹

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." 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."⁵² Ironically, the scholars' criticism of Abe's initiatives on security and transparency was echoed in polls that showed most Japanese shared their views.⁵³

Beginning in 2014, *Sankei* ran a series of columns titled "History Wars" and published a book with the same title in English that was distributed by the Global Alliance for Historical Truth (GAHT) to Japan specialists and journalists focusing on Japan.⁵⁴ It is a poorly researched and unconvincing jeremiad expressing right-wing concerns that Japan was losing the PR battle in the US to South Korea and China over East Asia's shared wartime past. Given the book's lack of credibility, *Sankei* was not helping turn the tide in this battle.

The *Sankei* has long been a mouthpiece for the revisionist cause. The *Sankei's* Washington-based reporter, Komori Yoshihisa, is a militant right-wing ideologue with a track record of attacking organizations and individuals who express critical views of the Japanese government, conservative nationalists, and historical revisionism.⁵⁵ He played a crucial role in launching a campaign against scholars working on controversial historical issues.⁵⁶ In 2003, Mike Mochizuki at George Washington University hosted a workshop on "Memory, Reconciliation, and Security in the Asia-Pacific Region: Implications for Japan-US." This was a gathering of academics and researchers from the US and Japan to facilitate dialogue and publish an edited volume on the topic. This never happened, largely because Komori was invited to attend. According to participants, discussions at the conference were balanced and focused on reconciliation issues. One participant recalled that Komori was vocal and "did take a nationalist position: I remember he lauded Kobayashi Yoshinori [a right-wing manga author] and talked skeptically about reconciling with China. He seemed to take all this in good humor, but I think we guessed wrong."⁵⁷ His *Sankei* article came out soon after and was aggrieved and tendentious in tone. He singled out "three participants who were Japanese nationals, asserting they were biased and unpatriotically critical

of the Japanese government. He argued that their behavior was prejudiced and unacceptable at a conference funded by Japanese public funds.⁵⁸ The headline of his front-page story was “Foreign Ministry Agency Sponsors Anti-Japan Seminars in the United States: Chinese and Korean Scholars Criticize Japan’s Stance on War Issues.”⁵⁹ He accused the Japan Foundation of sponsoring a series of anti-Japanese events and “simplified and distorted conference presentations beyond recognition, falsely claiming that Japan’s wartime actions were equated with the Holocaust.”⁶⁰

Apparently, Komori assumed that Japanese nationals should be pro-government. But participants found his accusations puzzling since “none were unduly critical or even polemical . . . it seemed quite contrived and exaggerated.”⁶¹ He questioned why taxpayers were subsidizing a “Japan-bashing” workshop, and his column was taken up in Diet debate, thereby politicizing research funding and sending a chill throughout the academic community. In this way, LDP lawmakers put pressure on the MOFA “to reign in the Japan Foundation,” said one participant, and Foreign Minister Kawaguchi Yoriko was forced to apologize. One insider told me, “this episode had a negative, intimidating effect on Japan Foundation’s independence and choice of politically sensitive projects.”⁶²

The conference funding came from the Center for Global Partnership (CGP), which was established in 1991 as part of the Japan Foundation with a large grant from MOFA. The CGP administers the Abe Fellows Program under the auspices of the government-funded Japan Foundation and in collaboration with the US-based Social Science Research Council (SSRC). Abe Fellowships are prestigious, competitive, and generous, and some of those who attended the conference were former Abe fellows. In the wake of this manufactured controversy over a small academic workshop aimed at producing an academic book with limited circulation, employees of Japanese funding organizations grew anxious about funding research that might come back to haunt them. As CGP/SSRC insider Frank Baldwin explains, “Academic freedom was a hit-and-run victim.”⁶³ This included self-censorship as the CGP canceled all planned events that might attract right-wing criticism.

This scandal remains embedded in the collective memory of scholars working on Japan worldwide, casting a long shadow over the field. The participants and many in the field were spooked by the incident and suddenly aware of how politicized history and research grants have become in twenty-first-century Japan. Apparently, Japan’s funding foundations help guide scholars by conveying research priorities and, if pressed, what topics are not likely to get funding.

In the wake of the Komori affair, the CGP pressured the SSRC, demanding changes in their Basic Agreement barring political meddling, and it withheld funding for SSRC staff, overhead, and ongoing seminar series until the SSRC capitulated. This was the hardball side of Japan’s soft power diplomacy. A

compromise was arranged in 2004 that maintained the appearance of SSRC autonomy but also gave final approval for all Abe awards to the Japan Foundation, exactly the sort of intervention the SSRC had tried to avoid. As Mike Mochizuki said, “After the *Sankei* attack and the political controversy that ensued, the CGP and the Japan Foundation became terrified about the possibility of similar criticism by nationalistic journalists in the future. They feared another media attack and political onslaught might destroy both.”⁶⁴

This context helps explain the subsequent scandal involving the proposal of George Washington University scholar Celeste Arrington for an Abe fellowship in 2015. Frank Baldwin, who was the Japan representative of the SSRC at the Center for Global Partnership from 1996 to 2011, has written an account of how her application was rejected despite an excellent evaluation from a panel of eminent scholars who reviewed the proposals for the SSRC.⁶⁵ As Baldwin details, the SSRC was facing financial problems, and thus, the partnership with CGP was a welcome lifeline. To ensure the integrity of the program, and to ward off Japanese government meddling, the SSRC insisted it would name an independent selection committee to review proposals and make awards free from Japanese intervention, lest it be perceived it was taking marching orders from Tokyo.

Arrington is a respected scholar with a solid track record of research in Japan and South Korea. She is not a firebrand on the history issues that trouble revisionists. In 2014, she got a whiff of the troubles that lay ahead over a paper she presented related to litigation and Japanese wartime atrocities, including the comfort women, at a US conference that was funded by the CGP. The main concern of the CGP was to avoid attracting negative attention in Japan due to the 2003 debacle, so it abruptly disassociated itself from the symposium when it learned of the details of her presentation. Her paper was balanced and scholarly, but she had touched on taboo topics and used the expression “sexual slavery” in reference to comfort women. For that, she was blacklisted.

Arrington applied for an Abe Fellowship in 2015 and her proposal, “Lawyers and Litigation in Japanese and Korean Politics,” was deemed exceptional by the peer review committee, the strongest they received. Her proposal had nothing to do with comfort women or hot button history issues. According to Baldwin, the CGP leaned on the SSRC to reject Arrington’s proposal and the scholars’ assessment because of the 2014 paper, and it leveraged its position as the SSRC’s third-largest source of funding to compromise the organization’s integrity.

Baldwin states that the message conveyed by the CGP to the review committee boiled down to: “please do our dirty work for us and rid the Japan Foundation of this troublesome applicant.”⁶⁶ The CGP warned that if Arrington was awarded the fellowship, it would have to veto it, threatening a scandal that would tarnish both organizations. At the suggestion of the SSRC, the committee screened out

Arrington's proposal, and she was sent the standard rejection notice, unaware then of the politicking that had denied her the award on merit.

But why make such a fuss over one fellowship? The Abe administration was prickly about criticism, especially in the US, and they were more inclined than any previous postwar Japanese government to intervene in order to muzzle critics and promote their views.⁶⁷ In 2015, the government tripled the public diplomacy budget, and since then, it has waged a public relations blitz aimed at cultivating positive views of Japan overseas. Ranging from producing infomercials on CNN and hiring Washington lobbyists, to endowing chairs in Japanese studies and establishing Japan Houses in London, Los Angeles, and São Paulo, Prime Minister Abe's government sought to nurture positive perceptions and counter negative appraisals.

MOFA, especially during the second Abe administration (2012–2020), became more aggressive on historical issues. For example, consular officials would attend Japan Foundation-funded programs and engage in dubious tactics, leveling critical broadsides against presentations that did not align with Japanese governmental views but ducking debate.⁶⁸ Scholars specializing in Japan around the world came to understand that they were being monitored, and they assume that this might affect future funding, fellowships, and awards. This more confrontational stance also caused panic at the SSRC/CGP, dependent as they were on the government's goodwill.

Japan: The Precarious Future (2015), a book project edited by Frank Baldwin and Anne Allinson that features chapters by several Abe Fellows and other scholars, was given the stiff-arm treatment.⁶⁹ The SSRC sponsored the project and arranged publication with New York University Press but distanced itself from promoting the book. It appears that Abe program officers in New York feared the book might invite critical comment about Abe Shinzō and get the CGP in trouble with the prime minister's office at a time when they were trying to manage the Arrington scandal. SSRC undercut promotion of *Precarious Future* by not listing it on its websites or mentioning it in news or social media posts. In an email sent out to contributors, Frank Baldwin drew attention to this situation and shared what he learned after complaining to the SSRC:

Ms. Levit (SSRC) had instructed staff that nothing about *Precarious* would be posted on the Abe Program page and the program would not be mentioned in news or social media posts about the book. Ms. Levit subsequently explained that SSRC had been “trying to disassociate the PF [Precarious Future] project from Abe” and “distancing the project from CGP and Abe.” Although SSRC finally acknowledged *Precarious* that day (Feb. 19), “distancing” did not end. Our book was excluded from the listing of publications by Abe fellows for another three months.⁷⁰

Oddly, the book is not particularly critical of Abe and subsequently enjoyed excellent reviews despite the SSRC's efforts to bury it.

This more interventionist approach escalated in 2018 at a conference commemorating the 150th anniversary of the Meiji Restoration hosted by Tel Aviv University.⁷¹ Because the Japan Foundation doesn't have an office in Israel, the Japanese Embassy there administered the grant funding the conference. Well past the deadline for applying, organizers reported that embassy staff insisted they include two Japanese participants who were associated with revisionist organizations.⁷² It was a large gathering with attendees from all over the world, a chance to showcase lively scholarly discussions about the Meiji era, but the two imposed participants made a spectacle of themselves by heckling other presenters and giving presentations that were unrelated to the conference theme. Instead, they offered revisionist diatribes that were debunked by attending scholars. These revisionists were wined and dined by the embassy and treated as special guests, but the effort backfired as those who attended the conference witnessed Japan at its worst, embracing a glowering nationalism that sent a message of intolerance and little consideration for scholarly standards.

Given the stiff competition for funding, Japanologists understand what is at stake, but if conferences and publications are a barometer of academic freedom, the Japanese government's efforts to stifle debate and criticism have been remarkably ineffective. The revisionist history promoted by Abe and others aligned with Nippon Kaigi (Japan Conference), an influential conservative lobby organization that downplays, denies, and shifts responsibility for wartime atrocities, has come under sustained criticism by Western scholars and journalists as unsubstantiated assertions and wishful thinking, an epic own goal.⁷³

Witch-Hunts

In Japan, *kakenhi* (grants-in-aid for scientific research) are crucial sources of MEXT funding for academics. Some scholars 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. Eminent historian Christopher Szpilman, who retired from Teikyo University in 2020, believes, "that many scholars in Japan will avoid controversial themes to avoid potential problems and not to be seen as potential troublemakers. Ruffling the feathers, rocking the boat is generally avoided. Even if their individual acts would not have any repercussions, most will take the easy way out and choose a subject that will not upset anyone."⁷⁴

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.⁷⁵ The *Sankei* targeted these scholars for criticism and drew attention to their participation at a 2017 conference on Korean forced labor. Apparently, conference organizers cooperated with a South Korean citizen’s group to compile a guidebook titled *Forced Labor and Heritage Sites of Japan’s Meiji Industrial Revolution*. The *Sankei* denounced this guidebook for criticizing the Japanese government’s application for UNESCO World Heritage designation. The guidebook warned, “Failing to reflect on the lessons of the past by remembering only those parts of history of which Japan can be proud is part and parcel of the project to remake Japan into a country which can once again wage war.”⁷⁶

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.⁷⁷

Nakano and his former MA student Mikine Dezaki were subjected to sustained vilification and threats of lawsuits by a right-wing group led by Fujioka Nobukatsu that filed a complaint with Sophia, asserting a violation of ethical research guidelines. Nakano was the academic supervisor of Dezaki’s MA graduation 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 grave human rights violations. Dezaki presents both sides of the controversy, but the revisionists make factually challenged assertions and racist comments, and they demonstrate an unfamiliarity with the extensive published research on the topic. In the film, they go on at length, so it’s not as if the editing made them out to be charlatans, but that is the impression they conveyed. Sophia 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 et al. organized rallies, disseminated documents to Sophia professors, petitioned the government, published articles, maintained a website and spread (dis)information on SNS etc.”⁷⁸ While Nakano and Dezaki were vindicated and

apparently remain undeterred, I was told these attacks “no doubt had a chilling effect on others. Every professor at Sophia knew about the case and that their colleague was singled out for an attack by the right-wing (as they received multiple envelopes containing incendiary files as part of their vilification campaign).”⁷⁹ Understandably, some scholars came to understand the risks and the need to be more careful.

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 ¥13 million (about \$100,000 USD) in compensation. However, Dezaki must pay the legal expenses for his defense involving six lawyers working on the case for thirty months, so exoneration has been costly. Problematically, he warns that “this makes it easy to silence people by bogging them down in legal fees.”⁸⁰ An appeal has been filed, ensuring more legal costs and the emotional burdens of prolonging the uncertainty.

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, “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.”⁸¹ Much of the conservative media coverage of the film was biased and misinformed; tarnishing Dezaki’s professional reputation while ignoring his court victory served to preserve that damage.⁸²

Much to the revisionists’ annoyance, however, the domestic and international response to *Shusenjo* has been overwhelmingly positive. The revisionist campaign backfired, and the notoriety proved to be good PR. Initially, a very limited release was planned in Japan, but the popularity of the screenings led to an extended nine-month run in Tokyo that played to an estimated audience of 70,000—quite large for a documentary.⁸³ In Europe and the US, Dezaki was invited to numerous university campuses, and he attracted large crowds. In South Korea, *Shusenjo* was screened at sixty theaters and won plaudits, big audiences, and extensive media coverage that helped improve Japan’s image because the film’s interviews with prominent liberal academics countered prevailing assumptions that all Japanese are in denial about the comfort women issue.

The battleground also extends to Europe, as evident in the Sasakawa versus Postel-Vinay affair. French scholar Karoline Postel-Vinay knows very well the cost of challenging Japan’s powerful right wing. In 2009, she lobbied against the French government’s cooperating with the Sasakawa Foundation in mounting a series of commemorative events.⁸⁴ Her argument was based on the baleful

wartime record of Sasakawa Ryoichi, the founder of the Nippon Zaidan (Nippon Foundation) that funds the Sasakawa Foundation and a person who has close ties with the government. Subsequently, the Sasakawa Foundation sued her for libel, an action that forced her to put aside ongoing research projects for over a year to defend herself. This lawsuit, and the ensuing arbitration process, was financially, professionally, and emotionally costly, taking a heavy toll on her and her family.⁸⁵ Fortunately, her family, colleagues, and university administrators provided crucial support in a battle in which she prevailed. The case was seen as a gross infringement on academic freedom. The Sasakawa Foundation's move to deny her historically accurate and documented depiction of its founder's unsavory past projected an authoritarian revisionism that generated a sharp backlash. Truth does not always prevail, but the French judicial system gave her a fair opportunity to fight the charges and prove her allegations. In the decade since the court ruled in her favor, the Sasakawa Foundation has lost influence in France as academics and universities cut ties with it, and it has been given the cold shoulder by the government. Rather than cowering French academia, the foundation lost face and marginalized itself in France.

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 don't promote their publications on social media or in the mainstream media. Essentially, if you maintain a low profile, it's possible to avoid attack. This strategy of avoiding controversy may be effective for some academics, but as we discuss below, the right wing doesn't only target high-profile scholars. Moreover, "keeping your head down and mouth shut" is tacit recognition that there is a threat to academic freedom in Japan. Openly advocating for the 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 of careers and ordinary living. 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.

In a free society, shouldn't academics have the right to express their views in public without being subjected to threats of violence or efforts to have them fired? One Tokyo-based scholar I interviewed suggested that professors who engage in public discourse are crossing the line between academia and activism, basically bringing it on themselves, even though this scholar had some unpleasant encounters and knew about the following case of a witch-hunt of a former journalist who became an academic and who had maintained a low profile.

Uemura Takashi, an academic and former *Asahi* reporter, knows all too well the high costs of becoming a target of revisionist trolls.⁸⁶ In 2014, after leaving

the *Asahi*, he was hounded in an orchestrated campaign of sustained harassment targeting him, his family, and the universities where he was teaching. He was bombarded with death threats, and anonymous trolls threatened to set off nail bombs on the campus of the university where he worked if he was not sacked. His alleged sin was being the first to report in 1991 the story of the comfort women who had been forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese military. His right-wing critics allege that he and the *Asahi* tarnished Japan's honor and that the comfort women accounts are fabrications. They also accused him, falsely it turns out, of writing stories based on the discredited testimony of a Japanese veteran, but in the hothouse of internet vilification, accuracy is often sacrificed. Subsequently, he resettled in South Korea to spare his family the nightmare of constant threats.

Uemura did nothing to invite this attack other than doing his job as a journalist, but as a result, he was pressured out of his job as an academic in Japan for articles he wrote almost a quarter of a century beforehand and ones he didn't write but was credited with.

Hate Speech and Art

Threats of violence targeting those with differing opinions are a significant threat to academic freedom and freedom of expression. It is a troubling sign of the times in Japan when the government fails to unequivocally condemn threats of violence that target freedom of expression while politicians advocate censoring art.⁸⁷ Organizers of the 2019 Aichi Triennale, a sprawling showcase of contemporary art, got more publicity than they bargained for. In an exhibit entitled *After "Freedom of Expression?"* organizers displayed some twenty transgressive works, including a comfort woman statue that incensed Japanese conservatives because it drew attention to the Japanese military's system of sexual slavery in the period between 1932 and 1945. The *Statue of a Girl of Peace* is a South Korean work depicting a young woman in traditional Korean attire sitting next to an empty seat. A similar statue is located across the street from the site of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul that Tokyo wants removed, along with others around the world that reproach the Japanese government over its inadequate contrition and efforts to downplay this sordid saga. Japan's culture wars escalated in early August 2019 over the art exhibit, as some right-wing activists took exception, sight unseen, to the *Girl of Peace* and a video installation depicting an image in a catalog of Emperor Showa (Hirohito) being burned with a blowtorch. Following a faxed threat that someone was going to set fire to the venue, hundreds of threatening emails, and scripted tirades by angry callers, organizers shut down the exhibit just three days after it opened, mindful of the arson attack on Kyoto Anime the previous month that killed thirty-five employees. It was certainly an ironic decision given the symbolism of displaying art that had been rejected or removed from previous shows for political reasons.

The *After “Freedom of Expression?”* exhibit was intended to highlight and challenge such efforts to stifle this freedom. Adding to the drama, the governor of Aichi accused the mayor of Nagoya of championing censorship by advocating closure of this special exhibit, asserting that this violated Article 21 of the constitution, which guarantees freedom of expression. The *Sankei* then tried to shift blame onto the organizers, accusing them of engaging in hate speech.⁸⁸

Perhaps unintentionally, the curator succeeded in highlighting how freedom of expression is threatened in Japan and how informed opinion has been overwhelmed by an ideologically charged public discourse. Plans to revive the show in 2021 were stymied by similar threats of violence. Revisionists’ efforts to rewrite the worst chapter of Japan’s modern history shone a limelight on it and imparted a whiff of what life must have been like under the militarists when censorship was widespread and dissent was dangerous. Curbs on freedom of expression in contemporary Japan appear to be gaining momentum under a reactionary political leadership, and they represent a threat to democracy and civil liberties. This incident represents one tile in a broader mosaic of gathering intolerance that casts a shadow over academic freedom, one that is orchestrated by conservative nationalists and amplified by online activists.⁸⁹

Harassment

Since 2015, a number of academics in the US have been subjected to disruptive freedom of information requests from an American professor based in Japan regarding all their emails pertaining to their research projects about Japan that focus on the comfort women.⁹⁰ 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 during 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.”⁹¹ She 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.”⁹²

Public universities in the US 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 premodern Japan at the University of California, Los Angeles, explains, “those who became targets of these right wing circles experienced a wide variety of online harassment as the *neto uyo* [right-wing 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.”⁹³ This is not only repugnant behavior but also a clear infringement on academic freedom. However, Curtis adds, “Although in many ways social media has been a platform where history is corrupted, twisted, and misrepresented to odious ends, it has also generated new possibilities for solidarity among those who would step up to challenge the misuse of the past and refuse to let malignant untruths proliferate without accountability.”⁹⁴

Conclusion

Structural constraints on autonomy represent the most insidious threat to academic freedom in twenty-first-century Japan. Neoliberal reforms enacted in Japan over the past two decades have compromised academic freedom and undermined university autonomy. The 2004 educational reform enhanced government leverage over universities by reducing subsidies and fostering competition over shrinking budgets. This heightened competition for funding among financially strapped universities incentivizes administrators to embrace central government guidelines and directives. This generates pressure on faculty to defer and conform, a groupthink that is inimical to academic freedom. Faculty have also been marginalized from university governance, making it harder to challenge constraints on academic freedom. Cuts in central government funding for university operational expenses have also resulted in staff cuts and an increase in the administrative duties of faculty while those interested in research must now spend more time applying for funding, making it more difficult for them to

exercise academic freedom. In terms of research, there is more reliance on carrots than sticks as MEXT and university administrators signal what the main funding opportunities are and, thus, the most promising areas for research proposals. Those in a position to channel funding can thus influence research agendas and thereby curb academic freedom. 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 who spend more time filling out forms and navigating red tape than conducting research, and meanwhile, the chronic lack of diversity that fosters narrow groupthink persists.

Signaling by politicians, bureaucrats, and educational administrators plays a key role in conveying priorities that align with political agendas. The common practice of *sontaku*, acting in accordance with the presumed wishes of superiors, also encourages self-censorship and conformity in higher education, and some academics trim their sails to the prevailing political winds. While carrots are favored, the stick is also wielded, as it was when the Japan Foundation intervened with funding for scholars and conferences to avoid harassment by, and to curry favor with, revisionist politicians. Academic freedom in postwar Japan has faced persistent government threats, but these are now more sustained and intensified. Since 2012, the emergence of a conservative political elite that is committed to mainstreaming revisionist and right-wing nationalist views on wartime history, colonialism, and other sensitive issues like national security and nuclear energy has fostered an unfavorable environment for exercising academic freedom or voicing dissent; this was evident in the high-profile veto of six appointments to the Science Council in 2020 because they had criticized government policies. Prime Minister Abe in particular, and his designated successor Prime Minister Suga, were aggressive in targeting their critics in academia and the mass media. This was a hydra-headed effort emanating from the *kantei* (prime minister's office) that spans government ministries, research agencies, funding foundations, international conferences, universities, mainstream media, social media, and it even extends to art exhibits. By strengthening the *kantei*'s control over high-level promotions in the bureaucracy, the Abe government created incentives to do his bidding.⁹⁵ This translated into tighter controls over textbook content, diplomatic support for revisionist reinterpretations of Japan's shared history with Asia, and a targeting of Abe's critics, including purges of journalists.⁹⁶ The LDP is also a key member of the nuclear village, and it reinstated nuclear energy in the national energy strategy in 2014, despite deep-seated public opposition to restarting nuclear reactors following the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster. This nuclear village sought to marginalize critics of nuclear energy and muzzle scientists who engaged in monitoring radiation and the impact of the three Fukushima meltdowns on coastal waters.

The odious trend of online intimidation, threats of violence, and intolerance is the toxic legacy of the Abe era. His signaling empowered right-wing activists online, and he never disavowed them or condemned their threats of violence. However, this thuggish campaign has not eradicated dissent or critical discourse, and 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.⁹⁷ Thus, right-wing efforts to curb academic freedom in Japan are hotly contested and have been counterproductive, projecting a glowering and intolerant nationalism that is inconsistent with Japan's avowed commitment to shared universal values.

Notes

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² Jeff Kingston, *The Politics of Religion, Nationalism, and Identity in Asia*, (Boulder: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019).

³ Jeffrey Hall, *Japan's Nationalist Right in the Internet Age: Online Media and Grassroots Conservative Activism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021).

⁴ Karyn Nishimura, "Stranger than Fiction" *Number One Shimbun*, February 2022, <https://www.fccj.or.jp/number-1-shimbun-article/stranger-fiction>.

⁵ For a detailed analysis of the erosion of civil liberties and constitutional rights and how this is contested in twenty-first-century Japan, see Lawrence Repeta, *Japan's First Prisoners of Conscience* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022). Such state efforts to curb freedom of expression undermine academic freedom because conservative media outlets and right-wing online activists feel empowered to target freedom of expression and harass academics who criticize the government's policies and agenda.

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¹⁷ Vickers, “Turtles,” 184.

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¹⁹ Personal communication with Edward Vickers, April 2021.

²⁰ Vickers, “Turtles.”

²¹ Vickers, “Turtles,” 188.

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/01/world/asia/japans-public-broadcaster-faces-accusations-of-shift-to-the-right.html>.

⁴⁵ Kingston, “Press Freedom.”

⁴⁶ NHK does produce powerful documentaries on war-related issues that challenge official and revisionist views, but these are infrequently broadcast and don’t attract the large audiences associated with news programs.

⁴⁷ Interview, April 2021.

⁴⁸ *Sankei* Editorial, “Government Meddling? Or Does the Science Council of Japan Need Drastic Reforms?” *Japan Forward* (October 6, 2020), <https://japan-forward.com/editorial-government-meddling-or-does-the-science-council-of-japan-need-drastic-reform/>.

⁴⁹ Science Council of Japan, <http://www.scj.go.jp/en/index.html>.

⁵⁰ Communication from Suzuki Tatsujiro, Nagasaki University, March 2020.

⁵¹ Pugwash Japan, “日本学術会議会員任命拒否に関する決議” (Resolution on Refusal to Appoint Members of Science Council of Japan), October 18, 2020, <https://www.pugwashjapan.jp/sokai-ketsugi-20201018>.

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⁵⁴ *Sankei*, “History Wars, Japan—False Indictment of the Century,” translation directed by Komori Yoshihisa (Tokyo: *Sankei*, 2017).

⁵⁵ David McNeill, “The Struggle for the Japanese soul: Komori Yoshihisa, *Sankei Shimbun*, and the JIIA Controversy,” *Asia-Pacific Journal Japan Focus* 4, no. 9 (September 4, 2006), <https://apjif.org/-David-McNeill/2212/article.pdf>.

⁵⁶ This section draws on Jeff Kingston, “Japanese Revisionists’ Meddling Backfires,” *Critical Asian Studies* 51 (September 2019), 437–450.

⁵⁷ Interview, January 2016.

⁵⁸ Frank Baldwin, “Book Burning in Japan. *AAUP Journal of Academic Freedom* 10 (2019), 2, <https://www.aaup.org/sites/default/files/Baldwin.pdf>.

⁵⁹ Komori Yoshihisa, “Gaimushō no kabukikan Bei de tai-Nichi kyūdan semina, Chu-Kan no gakushara sengo taiō o hinan [Foreign Ministry Agency Sponsors Anti-Japan Seminars in United States: Chinese and Korean Scholars Criticize Japan’s Stance on War Issues],” *Sankei Shimbun*, February 12, 2003.

⁶⁰ Baldwin, “Book Burning,” 2, <https://www.aaup.org/sites/default/files/Baldwin.pdf>.

⁶¹ Confidential interview with participant, March 2019.

⁶² Personal communication, January 2020.

⁶³ Baldwin, “Book Burning,” 5.

⁶⁴ Baldwin, “Book Burning,” 9.

⁶⁵ Baldwin “Book Burning,” 13–15.

⁶⁶ Baldwin, “Book Burning,” 14.

⁶⁷ Jeff Kingston, “The Japan Lobby and Public Diplomacy,” *Asia-Pacific Journal Japan Focus* 14, no. 9 (May 1, 2016), <https://apjif.org/2016/09/Kingston.html>.

⁶⁸ Kingston, “Japan Lobby.”

⁶⁹ I coauthored a chapter for this volume.

⁷⁰ Email, June 16, 2016.

⁷¹ Confidential interviews with organizers and participants.

⁷² Jeff Kingston, “Japanese Revisionists’ Meddling Backfires,” *Critical Asian Studies* 51 (September 2019), 437–450.

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⁷⁷ Interview, March 2021.

⁷⁸ Confidential communication.

⁷⁹ Confidential communication.

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⁸¹ Personal communication, February 2022.

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⁸⁴ Karoline Postel-Vinay, “History on Trial: French Nippon Foundation Sues Scholar for Libel to Protect the Honor of Sasakawa Ryōichi,” *Asia-Pacific Journal Japan Focus* 8, no. 17 (April 26, 2010), <https://apjff.org/-Mark-Selden/3349/article.html>.

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⁹⁰ Personal communication, January 2022.

⁹¹ Personal communication, January 2022.

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⁹⁵ Aurelia George-Mulgan, *The Abe Administration and the Rise of the Prime Ministerial Executive* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017).

⁹⁶ Kingston, "Press Freedom."

⁹⁷ Joyce Lau, "Japanese Scholars Fear Further Assaults on Academic Freedom," *Times Higher Education* (October 16, 2020), <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/japanese-scholars-fear-further-assaults-academic-freedom>.