
AN EVALUATION OF STUDY IN JAPAN*

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Is it worth going to study in Japan?

Compared with going to America or Europe, ...?

Are you satisfied with your study in Japan?

Are there many problems?

More and more often, I have been asked by my students at the Faculty of Political Science, Thammasat University, about the advantages and disadvantages of studying in Japan. I found it difficult to answer my students when they asked me, after obtaining scholarships to study abroad, whether they ought to further their studies in Japan or in another western country. I have never seriously thought of this problem.

Japanese Government Scholarship (Mombusho) enabled me to further my graduate study in Japan.¹ I arrived at Waseda University in Tokyo on April 10, 1970, spending one year in Japanese, and training at Gogaku Kenkyu-jo (goken), Waseda University. I spent three years working for my M.A. at the Japanese History Department, Faculty of Literature. I think these four years of study in Japan were certainly much

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more valuable than my 4-year-study at the Faculty of Political Science, Chulalongkorn University and certainty over-shadowed my 1-year-study abroad in the U.S.A. under the American field Service Scholarship during 1965-1966.

In front of me, on the first day of my arrival at Waseda campus, were tremendous student demonstrations, hyde park style speeches, protest placards and posters, flags (not national flags, of course) and crowd gatherings everywhere. I was shocked to find that a country culturally so unified, naturally so beautiful and economically so prosperous like Japan, should have such serious continuous campus riots. The riot processions were like that of an army with different flags of different divisions, regiments and battalions. I wondered why on the opening of the academic year there should be the opening of such violent protests. Throughout my 4-year-study at Waseda, these events dominated campus life and sometimes threatened normal classroom activities. I later realized that politically, Japan was so divided. I found that conservative-progressive conflicts prevailed both in the national scene and in social relationship among faculty members.

The year I spent studying Japanese language at "goken" was a valuable one. Unlike most Mombusho scholarship students, I did not have to go to Osaka University of Foreign Studies for my language training since Waseda's "goken" offered courses for foreign students. I continued to receive my language training there for about two more

years to improve my reading and writing. I was also able to acquaint myself with Waseda University, student clubs, friends from other foreign counties, and the surrounding bookshops. I shall touch upon the language problem later.

I was enrolled in the Japanese-History Department in April 1971 and finished my study in April 1974. My M.A. thesis was about studying abroad, "The Sending of Japanese Students to study Abroad in Late Edo and Early Meiji : The State and the Role of Ono Azusa After Returning to Japan." My thesis advisor is an authority on modern Japanese history and wrote many books on modern Japan, Professor Kano Masanao. Waseda's Japanese History Department, both its undergraduate and graduate courses, enjoys a good reputation of high standard. This is probably due to its long history, the compilation of the 50 years of Modern Japan by Okuma Shigenobu, the University' founder, and perhaps, the traditions of academic independence and criticism (*zaiya no seishin*).² At the time of my enrolment there were only two students in the seminar class on Meiji History, myself and Mr. Miki Tamio. The Seminar on Showa History consisted of the same number of students, Mr. Okada Dennis, a Japanese Canadian and another Japanese student. In the following year, my seminar class welcomed a Korean student, Mr. Park, adding to a kind of international atmosphere.

To graduate with an M.A. degree, fourty units, or ten courses (four unit each), are required. A thesis is indispensable. I

registered for courses on Edo History, Meiji History, Taisho History and Showa History. The two courses I took at other faculties included Japanese Education History at the Faculty of Education and Japanese language at "goken", replacing English in my case as a foreign student. I found that every course was conducted in the method of a seminar. Professors did not lecture and did not take a leading role. I often thought that I was given very little from them in terms of knowledge and advice and that I had the impression that I was trained more by the seminar class, the atmosphere, and criticisms from my classmates. The professors, most of the time, just sat and listened.

During my study at Waseda University, I had a good opportunity to attend for about 2 years a graduate course on International Relations in East Asia, at the College of Liberal Arts, University of Tokyo.³ I found that, not different from other seminars, each student was assigned to take turn presenting his or her research finding or progress report. After the presentation, questions and comments followed while the professor reserved the privilege of being the last questioner or commentator. Sometimes he raised questions and sometimes he did not. To me, the role of the professor was closer to a moderator than a teacher. According to this method of self-study, each student was expected to perform well in front of his M.A. classmates, his Ph.D. seniors and his professor. Unprepared presentation will undoubtedly be extremely costly. The professor's lectures on the same subject in the undergraduate

level were more instructive to me, but students did not attend regularly. I did not know whether they did their own readings or not, but the works in two or three volumes of the professor were available at the University's bookstore. I had the impression that Japanese professors did their jobs well in doing research and publishing their works. Their writings, in the native language, of course, helped preparing students to be ready for "seminar" type of graduate training. I envied Japanese college students their luck, not having to rely on books in western language, a serious problem today in my country.

I think the "seminar" (zemi in Japanese) is the essential mechanism of the education system at the graduate level in Japan. With the typical way of conducting it, the seminar system determines the student's thesis advisor, serves as a platform for presenting one's findings and progress reports, creates a semi-organizational group life with Ph.D. and M.A. seniors including a secretary to be nominated from a new comer. There are activities during the year under the coordination of the secretary, which includes *bonen-kai*, New Year visit to the professor's house and graduation party, etc. The Japanese seminar system does not necessitate the professors to distribute course outlines at the first meeting. I think the ties between students and professors in each seminar are closer than in our cases in Thailand, even though the professor "acts" very little as a teacher.

We do not have such a seminar system in Thailand. In our system, the title of the

thesis could be decided rather late, even after the so-called comprehensive examination, if there is one. Thesis is not required in many institutions. Thesis supervisor is to be chosen later on, not an urgent matter. In our case, course outlines will be distributed during the first meeting explaining the course's objective and scope, possible topics for paper writings, evaluation methods, paper requirements and other expectations on the part of the professors. In this way, we do not have a sense of "belonging", or to exaggerate a bit, a sense of the "family belonging". The students can shop around and make choices before he finally makes up his mind about his thesis' title.

Frankly speaking, I suffered a lot from the Japanese seminar system I believed my foreign firends did too. It is too advanced. I think it has been designed for "researchers", rather than "students", or one may even put it, for a junior "gakkai". The training process is expected to strengthen one's research ability and each does his own study independently. The most serious problem I faced was language. Japanese language is one of the most difficult languages in the world, but on top of that I had to read Edo documents, the so-called "Sorobun" and the Meiji Japanese. My knowledge of Japanese history and Japanese political system acquired in Thailand was too superficial for any use, it was a complete blank beyond the name of Professor Edwin O. Reischauer. I had to force myself to listen to presentations in the seminar classes on such narrow subjects like a certain historical event or a certain historical personality. I did not think I could finish my study.

I welcome the recent efforts of making studying in Japan more attractive to foreign students. The efforts include the establishment of a Public Policy Program in English at Saitama University and at the International University in Niigata,⁴ not to mention the existing M.A. Program in English at Sophia University. There, with more internationalized atmosphere, foreign students could obtain more effectively sources of knowledge, could communicate easier with professors, act more positively in stead of being a passive participant, and could write his thesis with more reasonings and interpretations of his own.

While appreciating these internationalization efforts, we must always keep in mind that these efforts may obstruct direct communication with Japanese students and professors and that the problems of language may be aggravated. Shared happiness and suffering could not be experienced. Having attended some courses at Sophia University, I must say that it was like studying about Japan in the United States, thus it may contribute very little to the internationalization of Japanese universities. Together with difficulties during my years at Waseda, I do, however, take pride in my preserverance in trying to do what Japanese students do. My disappointment with the supervision system of Japanese professors was compensated for by the offering from Professor Kano Masando to use his "kenkyu-shitsu" for writing my thesis. This was indeed very kind of him. It greatly stimulated me to concentrate all my efforts in carrying out my research to its completion. "Professor Hora is not using

the room during the evening. But be careful to see that the room is in good order because Hora sensei is quite *urusai*", he said. He did this despite the scarcity of research facilities and despite the fact that the small room had to be shared by him and another faculty member. I concluded that the generosity, *ningensei* and *kokoro* of the Japanese people are to be felt and appreciated only in some particular situations. I wrote my M.A. thesis in my professor's office and managed to get it done finally. I must confess that this is one way of supervising foreign students, a *kokora* dimension.⁵

The caring of foreign students at Waseda is satisfactory to me. Waseda has had a long history of receiving students from China, Korea and Taiwan.⁶ The Liason Office there did their best in serving as a bridge between foreign students and the Waseda community. The activities sponsored by the Liason Office in which I participated included a hiking to Hakone and an overnight stay at Waseda's seminar house (*Kanshitei*) at Atami one or two hours away from the campus. I sensed that the Chief of the Liason Office at that time, Mr. Yamashiro, showed much concern for foreign students, especially Mombusho scholarship students. At Thammasat where I teach now the Liason Office is an extremely busy office and it serves faculty members, not foreign students. Looking at the case of a Japanese student who is now doing his M.A. degree at the Faculty of Political Science, Thammasat, I think he is rather left alone without much attention. Through the encouragement of the Liason

Office, the Association for International Friendship, a student club, helped us a great deal. I was able to have a Japanese advisory friend, who took me to his home at Kamakura, enabling me to see Japanese family life, to see the method of keeping the "futong" in the daytime and using them at night. In 1984, I was able to see Mr. Kawato, my advisory friend, Mr. Yamashiro, Mr. Miki and Professor Kano, exactly ten years since I left Waseda. Allow me to say that they represented the Japanese efforts at cultural exchanges and a challenge to other Asian countries in caring overseas students. They are always deep in my memory.

Whether studying abroad in Japan is a useful experience is a subjective issue and may not be worth discussing. I left Waseda in April 1974 and returned home in June after spending over a month travelling in Korea and Taiwan. Studying in Japan makes Korea and Taiwan interesting to me. The older generations in these two former colonies speak Japanese, appreciate Japanese classical and popular cultures and their attitude towards Japan is ambivalent. I could communicate with them in Japanese and look at Japan through their views. This is another advantage.

I was recruited as a lecturer at the Japanese Language Department, Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University in early 1975. The subjects I taught included Japanese history, Japanese geography, Japanese society Japanese economy and politics. I was transferred to the Faculty of Political Science, Thammasat University in May 1982 and have been teaching

there until the present. It seems to me that the name Thammasat University is quite well-known in Japan. The reasons may be that Thammasat students demonstrated against Japanese goods last year in 1984 and that the Japanese Studies Center was established there with the Opening Ceremony in June 1985.

As a University lecturer teaching Japanese subjects, I naturally found studying in Japan useful. The training system of graduate students in Japan emphasized independent study, self-responsibility, self-reliance and encouragement and stimulation to work hard. It is not a process of just learning and examinations. Japanese professors are committed academicians, self-devoted, and sacrificing themselves for the good reputation of their university and their department. The certificate of an M.A. degree has no symbolic meaning whatsoever. One receives it from the administrative clerk at any time convenient to him or her. There was no graduation gown, quite different from the case in Thailand. In the postwar period the Japanese have been persistently asking what is the meaning of graduation and education. The conflicts on domestic and foreign issues had been so intense that they had to put aside any attempt in seeking psychological warmth by cloaking the problems under ceremonies and decorations. Socialization process in Japan is very revolutionary and I viewed it as another valuable experience.

The Internationalization of universities in Japan is indeed an interesting topic for discussion.⁷ More and more students from developing countries come to study in Japan. They may expect Japan to carry out reforms

in the direction of either modernization westernization, Asianization (more relaxing) or de-Japanization (the Japanese language problem and others).⁸ Some may expect further that the Japanese become more interested and informed about the situations in Asia and other developing countries. In internationalizing the universities in Japan, many things have to be done, and I wish the efforts will include the solution of the language problem. The facilities belonging to Western institutions should be allowed to be utilized by Asian students. For example, the gokusai-bu at Waseda University, at least its library, should be "internationalized." Budgets of the Japan Foundation and other public and private sources should not be absorbed by advanced western institutions in the West, leaving a smaller portion to less developed Asian countries.

Now, the era of Ambo protest of the sixties and seventies is gone. Peace and order are the dominant trend. Also coming is the era of studying for employment's sake and narrow-minded preoccupation with material comfort, probably a dangerous sign of the internationalization. I hope my description about my studying in Japan above illustrates the problems I faced and supports some of the requests I am making. Whether the era of Ambo will be replaced by an era of internationalization is yet to be seen. The idea of increasing the number of foreign students to 100,000 by the end of the 20st century is actually a reflection of the economic mood, but whether it will be truly implemented is yet another question to be evaluated by both foreign students and Japanese circles, both government and the people.⁹

Footnotes

¹ The number of Thai students studying in Japan increased from 321 in 1982 to 418 in 1983, of which 255 are scholarship students and 163 are studying on their own expenses. This is bigger than the number of students from other Southeast Asian countries, but very small when compare to the cases of the Republic of China, People's Republic of China, and Korea. In 1982 students from these three "ryugakusei powers" are 3,085, 1,085 and 984 respectively. From *Wagakuni no ryugakusei seido no gaiyo* (Outline of Foreign Student System in Japan), published by the Foreign Students Division, UNESCO Department, Science and International Bureau, Ministry of Education, Tokyo, 1983 p. 3, and from my interview with officials of the above Foreign Students Division, Ministry of Education, Tokyo, April 1984.

² About the philosophical traditions of Waseda University in the context of this problem, see for example, Yamashiro Masaki, "Waseda daigaku ni okeru kokusai koryu no gaikyo" (The State of International Exchange at Waseda University), *Gaikokujin ryugakusei mondai kenkyu kaiho* (Newsletter, Japan Association for Foreign Student Affairs), No. 39, 1984, p. 6.

³ I would like to thank Professor Eto Shinkichi for his kind permission to allow me to audit in his classes.

⁴ This university has been seen as a model university for training international-minded students. See, "Japan's Quest for a New International Voice," Commemorative Address at the Graduate School of International Relations, International University of Japan, March 15, 1985, by Soedjatmoko, Rector of United Nations University, Tokyo, *Bulletin of the Graduate School of International Relations*, International University of Japan, No. 3, July 1985, p. 195.

⁵ I would like to express my profound appreciation to Prof. Kano Masanao for his kindness.

⁶ The first foreign student group to study at Waseda came from Korea, which dated back to 1894. Later, Chinese students came in 1988 and the number increased so rapidly that a Chinese Student Department was established to provide basic training, like Japanese language, in an exclusive manner. See Yamashiro Masaki, *op.cit.*, p. 7.

⁷ Herbert passin defined internationalization as "the awareness of interdependence; the process of adjusting to the involuement that arises from it, and the conditions that facilitate or impede the capacity to engage in these interactions," quoted in Hiroshi Mannari and Harumi Befer (editors), *The Challenge of Japan's Internationalization*, Kwansei Gakuin University and Kodansha International, 1983, p. 17. A Japanese professor critically suggested that the problem of the 671,788 Koreaus living in Japan, should also be viewed

under this concept as the "internal internationalization." See Tanaka Hiroshi, "Gakko kyoiku ni okeru uchi naru koku saika (The Internal Internationalization in School Education), a paper presented to the Fukuoka International Symposium on Education for Internationalization, Fukuoka, Japan, Oct. 18-19, 1984, organized by the Fukuoka UNESCO Association, Japan, p. 22.

⁸ I think the internationalization concept reveals several weak points, not strong points, of Japanese society, thus it may be regarded as a more objective concept than others on the study of Japan that we often heard i.e. modernization. See V. Carpenter, "Gaikokujing ryugakusei to daigaku no kokusaika" (Foreign Students and the Internationalization of Japan), a paper presented to the Fukuoka International Symposium on "Education for Internationalization," Fukuoka, Japan, Oct. 18-19, 1984, p. 16.

⁹ It is not clear where the idea of increasing the number of foreign students to 100,000 came from, and I am not sure whether the initiatives came from the majority of universities or faculty members in Japan. As early as 1983 Recommendations for Foreign Student Policy in the 21st Century was adopted by the Ministry of Education and at the present a think-tank body is investigating these problems under the chairmanship of Professor Kawano Shigeto, See Okamura Yutaka, "Tomen no ryugakusei mondai ni tsuite," (About the Foreign Student Problems Today), *Gaikokujin ryugakusei modai kenkyukai kaiho, op.cit.*, p. 1. I hope these ideas receive conscious supports from the professors at large, not only the Prime Minister and Mombusho.