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Japanese Higher Education as Myth (review)

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to the complexity of political reality. And yet it remains focused, economical, and accessible in its argument. Because this book offers compelling evidence of the effects of one-party dominance and draws a detailed picture of the ways in which social movements develop in response to particular institutional contexts, it will be useful to many sorts of comparative political scientists. Given that consumer protection in a global marketplace is likely only to grow in stature as a concern in the politics of advanced industrial democracies, the focus of this study promises to be apt for some time to come. The book has added bonuses as well, providing insight into both how intra-bureaucracy rivalries affect the Japanese political economy and how local governments use their own institutional opportunities to expand their activism. Specialists will find Maclachlan's book useful, but students at most levels will also be able to read it. I plan to assign it to mine.

Japanese Higher Education as Myth. By Brian J. McVeigh. M. E. Sharpe, Armonk, N.Y., 2002. xiii, 301 pages. \$29.95.

Reviewed by
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Brian McVeigh is one of the most prolific writers on Japan at the moment, and much of his work since the late 1990s has focused on the interface between education, ideology, and the state in Japan and particularly the problems of higher education. His earlier books include a full-scale account of a women's college and an account of the education ministry in his book on the state.¹ Now he has returned to this theme with a hard-hitting indictment of the entire Japanese university system. This is well-trodden territory, adding to earlier critiques by the likes of Robert Cutts and Ivan Hall in English,² plus a large number of equally vitriolic works in Japanese. What distinguishes McVeigh's work from much of the rest, however, is the scale and intensity of the critique and the volume of supporting documentation cited.

Given that personal experience is such an important part of this book, and therefore of any review of it, I should perhaps start by laying my own cards on the table. Like McVeigh, I have also taught in Japan for many years,

1. *Life in a Japanese Women's College* (London: Routledge, 1997); *The Nature of the Japanese State* (London: Routledge, 1998), chapter 6.

2. Robert Cutts, *An Empire of Schools* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1997); Ivan Hall, *Cartels of the Mind* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998).

though in a different range of institutions.³ Even though I have experiences similar to almost everything McVeigh describes, my view is less static and more optimistic than his. I would also argue that in the last couple of years (i.e., since this book was completed), the rate of change in Japanese higher education has been accelerating rapidly.

A summary of the book can be brief as McVeigh has done an excellent job (pp. 37-43). Following Refsing,⁴ he argues that schooling in (post)industrial societies has four functions: education, socialization, selection, and as a depository regulating the supply of labor. In relation to the last three of these, he argues, the Japanese system performs well. It is in relation to education that it fails to deliver. State structures and corporate forces combine through a system of state guidance (*shidō*) to deliver model pupils, workers, family members, and citizens, and examinations are a crucial part of the system. Knowledge is thus packaged in a form to make jumping the examination hurdles possible, and in the process becomes detached from the real world and rendered meaningless. The result is student apathy and an unwillingness to express opinions or answer questions in class. Schooling is “simulated” and rituals such as taking attendance substitute for measures of achievement. Tremendous emphasis is put on learning English, but this too is divorced from reality and used mainly as a means of ranking students in examinations. Students thus fail to confront critically major social and political issues during their education, ultimately affecting the country’s ability to change and reinforcing its insularity. Finally, McVeigh argues that attempts at educational reform are themselves simulated, so that they are unable to achieve meaningful change. What is needed, therefore, is “reform of reform,” but with the usual suspects such as the education ministry in control, this is inherently unlikely.

But is this really a fair picture of the system? I myself have faced groups of apathetic and sullen students similar to those he describes in a variety of institutions, but would add that there are also many more positive encounters. First, I myself found that the quality of communication and student work improved considerably as I was able to work increasingly in Japanese. (In McVeigh’s account, it is not really clear which language was being used in the classes he described, or whether language was a significant variable. It would be interesting to know.) Second, McVeigh tends to treat all classes as being similar. My own experience has been that third- and fourth-year seminars are very different from other teaching, and this is where staff-student relations become much closer and where students typically produce

3. Three years at the University of Tokyo (national), six years at Shiga University (national), and three years at Asia Pacific University (private).

4. Kirsten Refsing, “Japanese Educational Expansions, Quality or Equality,” in Roger Goodman and Kirsten Refsing, eds., *Ideology and Practice in Modern Japan* (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 116-29.

their best work—the best of which is as good as anything I found in the United Kingdom. Third, from my own experience, the 1990s were actually a period of rapid change in Japanese universities, with better computing systems and library services, as well as new courses, campuses, and universities, coming on stream. McVeigh doesn't say much about these changes. Indeed, he tends to cite sources written over a 30-year period to justify statements and arguments about the present, which in turn implies that there has been no meaningful change from the past. To be fair, McVeigh emphasizes that he is more interested in the “hundreds of unknown universities and colleges attended by most students” than in the more famous schools, and that he is analyzing the “weak links” in the chain rather than indicting the whole system (pp. 20-21), but other statements in the book do read rather like general indictments, such as that Japan has, “for all practical purposes, an *entire system* of universities and colleges that is defective” (p. 26, emphasis in original).

McVeigh also seeks to avoid detailed comparisons with other countries. Comparing educational systems is complex, and we should “first thoroughly explore one theme, aspect, or component of an educational system and *then* make comparisons” (p. 34, emphasis in original). This creates difficulties, for in order to criticize, one has either to compare a system with a model of excellence elsewhere or at least with systems that perform differently. In fact, McVeigh does make comparative comments at various points in the book, though these form an interesting contrast with his generally strong statements about the failure of the Japanese system. For instance, on page 12 we read, “One might say that overall . . . Japan's educational system is probably no better or worse than that of any other G-7 industrialized nations in terms of how successfully it reproduces, year by year, the different types of workers demanded by modernity's capitalist socioeconomic systems.” If so, then what is wrong with the Japanese system, making it such a failure? “Specifically, many students are not well-trained in writing critically, arguing coherently, or expressing their views with conviction or verve. In short they have trouble with specific forms of knowledge manipulation and production that some people, with different schooling experiences, might take for granted” (p. 13). So is the problem that Japanese students don't meet the expectations of foreign professors? Well, not necessarily, for McVeigh then continues, “For what it is worth, not a few American instructors who have taught both in the United States and Japan have told me that if compared to their American counterparts, the number of students in any given course who are actually interested in learning is the same (though personally I believe that the number is much smaller at most universities in Japan). *However, the significant difference between American and Japanese students is that a surprising number of the latter do not have to come to class, hand in papers, or pass examinations to graduate from university*” (ibid., emphasis

added), suggesting that the fundamental problem is one of management and accountability. Even if there are plans to change this situation, with the worldwide rise of the “audit culture” in which Japan shares, McVeigh is skeptical. “For my present purposes, I am not interested in hearing from and reporting about what Japan’s state educational elites are planning by way of reform, . . . I am more interested in the students who . . . are victims of well-intentioned but elite-serving plans.” So, McVeigh’s conclusions can be summarized thus: the entire system is a failure, reforms will not reform, and students will therefore remain innocent victims. A gloomy vision indeed.

Against this, I might end by mentioning briefly some current trends that may eventually lead to positive change in the system. (McVeigh mentions some of them briefly, and others have happened since his book was completed.) First, government plans to make state universities more autonomous are being implemented, and they are likely to be more far-reaching than might have been expected three years ago. Second, a Center of Excellence Program has been implemented, rewarding research-active universities with large sums of extra cash. If the experience of the United Kingdom over the last 20 years is anything to go by, this is the start of even greater polarization in the Japanese system, but it could also result in more research of international standard in the better universities. Third, the implications of the demographic downturn are increasingly starting to bite, and that will lead to closures and amalgamations of institutions on a dramatic scale in the next few years. Fourth, some private universities, with government encouragement, have entered the international market, the most conspicuous examples being the Asia Pacific programs mounted by Waseda and the Ritsumeikan Trust. Fifth, an increasing number of high schools are sending children abroad for long periods in exchange for foreign students visiting Japan, and this will increase both the number of Japanese fluent in English and the number of foreigners fluent in Japanese. Sixth, an increasing number of Japanese educated abroad are joining the staff of universities in Japan, and the number of foreign professors is also increasing. Seventh, an increasing number of established Japanese scholars are showing an interest in making the results of their research available to scholars outside Japan. All these trends taken together suggest a much more fluid situation than existed a decade ago, and they might eventually have a trickle-down or demonstration effect on the rest of the system as well. Changes imposed from the top really can transform a system, as has been shown in the United Kingdom.

To sum up, McVeigh’s book is a provocative addition to the debate on Japanese higher education and should be compulsory reading for anyone in the field. It is probably best regarded as a polemic rather than a rounded account of the system, given his penchant for sweeping generalizations. However, it also seems to this reviewer that, despite McVeigh’s doubts about the possibility of reform, the winds of change are in fact gathering pace. This

may be due not only to the economic recession and the demographic decline in Heisei Japan, but also to the sustained efforts of critics of the system—including McVeigh himself.

Farmers and Village Life in Twentieth-Century Japan. Edited by Ann Waswo and Nishida Yoshiaki. RoutledgeCurzon, London, 2003. xii, 296 pages. \$95.00.

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Based on workshops held in 2000 at Oxford University and the University of Tokyo, this useful volume contains chapters by five non-Japanese and six Japanese specialists on aspects of rural society in Japan during the twentieth century. Today many of the contributors focus on other topics not directly related to Japanese village life; thus the book constitutes a well-crafted retrospective of the field rather than a manifesto for future research.

Coeditor Ann Waswo, noting the great diversity of rural Japan, points out that the writers deliberately skirt questions of state policy and agricultural economics in order to focus on agency in the hands of local cultivators: “we seek to emphasize the actions and attitudes of farmers themselves as they have confronted and coped with new opportunities and new challenges . . . we seek to demonstrate that Japanese farmers played an active and largely positive role in Japan’s modern trajectory” (p. 3). The case studies discussed in this volume are drawn almost entirely from villages in Honshu, mainly east of Osaka. In many chapters, readers will hear familiar echoes of the post-Marxist, postpositivist historiography known as *minshūshi* (people’s history) pioneered by Irokawa Daikichi, Kano Masanao, and others in the 1960s.

Especially valuable is a *mise-en-scène* chapter by coeditor Nishida Yoshiaki, an economist, striking a chord for the whole book. Using fiction, diaries, and abundant statistics, Nishida skillfully sketches the interactions between farmers and the major forces affecting agriculture between 1900 and 1945, then summarizes recent research on how the land reforms of 1947 were implemented locally. The pages on wartime, 1937–45, are gripping. In the wake of the great depression, tenancy disputes, and efforts at rural rehabilitation, tenants particularly benefited from measures to stabilize food production under national mobilization for war starting in 1938. By cooperating with the war effort, tenants in one Niigata village managed to resolve their land-tenure problems, achieving *de facto* land reform by the spring of 1945.