

# On the Institutionalization and Transformation of the Social Sciences in Japan

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Universities in Japan have undergone extensive changes within the context of academic deregulation since the 1990s. These changes have affected not only the university system and its general organizational behavior, but also the state of knowledge itself. It should be taken for granted that whatever the particular era, universities have always encountered intervention in their activities from centers of power. Today, alongside the introduction of market principles to higher education, wide-ranging reforms are being made to university organization and a more general “scrap-and-build” approach to educational management is being comprehensively adopted.

However, there is a more significant problem afoot. This lies in the fact that the reforms being made today to the organization of our education systems are actually changing the very methods by which our knowledge is transmitted, if not breaking knowledge today away from that of the past. In Japan, the collapse of what is usually called *gaku-shi*, or the “history of the disciplines” is perhaps the most symbolic marker of this trend.

*Gaku-shi* as a discipline was originally conceived to explore how academic knowledge is passed on within each specialist field (and in this sense we could say that *gaku-shi* in itself was one specific manifestation of the transmission of academic values). It has often been pointed out that the formation of *gaku-shi* happened in parallel with that of the modern nation-state. For this reason there is no denying the fact that criticism of *gaku-shi* as a discipline has taken place from within the context of that of the nation-state. Much of the criticism levied against *gaku-shi* has come about through the positive influence since the 1970s of new theoretical trends such as postcolonial studies and cultural studies. These new theoretical trends

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helped to provide a radical critique of established academic disciplines and brought about many important “Turns” to academic practice.

However, as market values and the ideologies of neoliberalism have penetrated society ever more thoroughly, there has been a serious change in the kinds of knowledge people in general now show an interest toward. We must begin to think about the challenges this kind of change has placed upon us as well as the implications that this fact has for Asian Studies as a whole.

The Japanese university system and research establishment began by introducing academic disciplines from the West, but underwent some important changes during the 1920s and 1930s. For instance, the institutionalization of the disciplines (their systemization and specialization) and the formation of an organized research establishment occurred alongside the popularization and opening up of the university system to the general public during this period. This process can be seen clearly in the institutionalization of Economics as a discipline. At that time in Japanese economics, Marxism provided the main currents and also came to considerably influence the Social Sciences and Humanities as a whole. In doing so, Marxism helped to support a critical spirit and imagination even for those who were critical of its aims<sup>1</sup>. Whereas Marxism was a substantial influence in this way, it was also during the wartime period that the Social Sciences, conceived of as a science of policy began to steadily gain legitimate academic weight.

For example, my own specialist discipline, International Economics, was established in the 1930s<sup>2</sup> and is directly linked to the formation of Asian Studies in Japan. Asian Studies was initially carried out as national policy, not only through the famous cases of the South Manchurian Railway Company and the Research Institute for Tropical Medicine, but also in the case of organizational research like the “Survey of Chinese Village Customs” (*Chugoku noson kanko chosa*), all of which were heavily incorporated into Japan’s colonial policies in the region. After the defeat of Japan in WWII, the fact that the institutionalization of the university system and the disciplines within it had played a key role in Japan’s colonial policy was all but forgotten. Despite this history, however, the university system and disciplines like

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Asian Studies which had been established during the colonial period continued into the postwar – even down to the individuals engaged in wartime/postwar research. Colonial Studies in Japan changed their name to International Economics, Development Theory and Asian Studies and carried on to tackle the new challenges which were presented them in the postwar.

Today, the university system is in crisis within the context of globalization. Our frameworks for knowledge are constantly being reformed. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the influence of Marxism has reduced significantly. Asian Studies has undergone increasing systemization and specialization and has lost much of its critical spirit as it has developed as a policy science for business strategy and foreign affairs. It would seem today that the central activity with which Asian Studies is engaged in is a constant analysis of the current situation that crucially lacks any sense of historical awareness<sup>3</sup>. This lack of historical awareness is symbolic of the collapse of *gaku-shi* in the disciplines. It should be taken for granted that talking about the “great traditions of knowledge” within the university is the stuff of mere fantasy as the frameworks of our knowledge are always changing and on the move. However, what we are facing today is less a re-ordering or reconstitution of our frameworks of knowledge than a severe break in the succession and inheritance of that knowledge itself.

*Translation by Mark Winchester*

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<sup>1</sup> This is not to say that Japan’s Social Sciences only consisted of Marxism, but that the vast majority of theorists and researchers could not avoid coming into contact at some point with Marxist perspectives. For instance, the Japanese economist, mathematician and econometrician, Morishima Michio, former professor of economics at the London School of Economics, also published a book on *Marx’s Economics*.

<sup>2</sup> Around this time several internationally recognized texts on the subject of international economics were published in Japan, including Roy Forbes Harrod and Gottfried von Haberler’s theories on international trade. It was also during the 1930s and 1940s that publishing companies in Japan began projects to publish “Complete Works” in Economics (*keizaigaku zenshu*) collecting together what were considered the key texts of the discipline.

<sup>3</sup> For instance, it would seem that, in general, the majority of Asian Research

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Centers and Asian Economic Research facilities have moved in emphasis away from historical and structural area studies research to statistical development economics-type analysis.