

# Toxic Academic Culture in East Asia

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The recent rise of East Asian universities has greatly impressed the academic world. East Asia's advance in higher education is both actual and perceived. The bubbling and gurgling in the media and in the literature need to be interrogated. Questions still remain about the real potential of East Asian universities, and whether they can truly break the bonds of Western hegemony. While recognizing the substantial collective progress East Asian societies have made in higher education over the past decades, we should not lose sight of some of the challenges they are facing. One critical factor that has not been as well discussed is how their future success could be undermined by the toxic academic culture currently endemic in the region.

## AN ENDEMIC CULTURE

Academic culture refers to the attitudes, beliefs, and values held by academics in relation to various aspects of their work. It has strong impact on what is done, how it is done, and who is involved in doing it, concerning decisions, actions, and communication on both instrumental and symbolic levels. A number of terms have been used to describe the academic culture in East Asian universities, such as integrity, ethics, misconduct, and even corruption. Academic culture has been cited as a significant impediment for East Asian higher education to reach a leading status in the world. Corrupt academic culture damages the standing of institutions and the academic community badly. An academic culture that is based on meritocratic values, free inquiry, and competition is largely absent in East Asia.

Throughout the region, academic dishonesty has long been an issue, from students cheating to fraud by scientists. Research shows that academic dishonesty is increasing in Hong Kong and Taiwan. South Koreans dub their nation as the "Republic of Plagiarism." Perhaps more successfully than any other people of the world, the Japanese have developed a social system capable of ensuring order and proper behavior. However, Japan is by no means immune from academic fraud. The 2000s witnessed much publicity over high-profile cases of scientific misconduct. More recently, the Japanese academic establishment was stunned by Haruko Obokata's fabricated data, doctored images, and plagiarism.

Academic misconduct is particularly serious in China. Since the 1990s, academic culture has fast become decadent and this "tainted" culture has penetrated deeply into the higher education sector from regional to national flagship institutions, and permeated every aspect of university operations. Mirroring the wider society, it takes various forms, and those involved include students, professors, academicians, and institutional leaders. Within the Chinese higher education system, being promoted into government or even staying within universities with administrative roles can mean far more substantial financial rewards than what pure academic work can bring. Chinese scholars are therefore more and more prone to becoming trapped in the pursuit of administrative standing, rather than devoting their time to legitimate academic research.

## DEVASTATING EFFECTS

Under the influence of a corrupt academic culture, the practice of *guanxi* restricts the free movement of staff, students, and resources, and career advancement of faculty. Decision-making is not based on academic merit, but on personal relationships and preferential treatment. Plagiarism and the falsification of scientific results are common. Those in powerful positions carve up major research grants. Without many opportunities left for diligent individuals, academics

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seek instant success and quick bucks, and misconduct is often found in daily practices. This toxic culture has devastating effects on higher education development and the region's modernization programs, leading to distortions and inefficiency at both institutional and systemic levels. The practices damage the morale of individuals and institutions, ruin the academic atmosphere of East Asian universities, and pollute the minds of young students. It is serious enough to keep the development of the region's advanced science from success.

As a reaction to rampant academic dishonesty, it is fair to point out that state education policies have begun to stress the need for preventing research misconduct. The Chinese government, for example, has stepped up efforts to build academic norms and research integrity since the 2000s, through developing standards and regulations, setting up special agencies, issuing policy papers, organizing national forums or seminars, and promoting international

cooperation. With growing awareness of such a serious issue in the region, some East Asian universities have established their own units to deal with academic fraud and corruption. While it is reasonable to expect some positive instantaneous policy impacts, when considering the width and depth of the issue in the societies, it is just not realistic to hope that the problem will be uprooted in the years to come.

Despite a few scandals, Japan distinguishes itself from its regional neighbors in academic culture. This explains why Japan has been the best performer in the region, as illustrated by its unrivalled 21 Nobel Prizes in science and technology, while other East Asian societies have had none until 2014. It is important to note that Japan's early Nobel Prizes were won when Japan was in extremely difficult conditions. Similarly, the latest and only Nobel Prize in science and technology based on work conducted in the region was awarded to a Chinese scientist in 2015. Because her work was done almost exclusively during the 1970s, when China was suffering from economic hardship and political isolation, her achievement is no outcome of China's contemporary academic culture.

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#### CONCLUSION

Academic culture matters hugely. East Asia's corrupt academic culture hurts the region's higher education directly, with profound impact on everyday operations. Only Japan has achieved a good academic culture. Unfortunately, it is far beyond the scope of the higher education sector to solve these widespread, deep-rooted social problems, though the situation differs among the region's societies. The toxic academic culture is another expression of East Asia's greatest challenge: universities have not yet figured out how to combine the "standard norms" of Western higher education with traditional values. The Western concept of a university has been adopted only for its practicality. East Asian higher education development is fundamentally about the relations between Western and indigenous higher education traditions, a relationship that has rarely been managed well. ■

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## International Higher Education and the "Neo-liberal Turn"

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In its original form, international higher education, which emphasized staff and student mobility and collaboration between universities across national frontiers, was one of the most idealistic, even altruistic, aspects of higher education. The myth-ideal of the wandering scholar in the Middle Ages was reinforced by the role played by imperial universities in educating colonial (and, ultimately, post-colonial) elites and also the role played by modern higher education systems in these countries in terms of aid and capacity building as well as the continued training of elites in the developing world. Today, international education is perhaps the aspect of higher education most associated with markets and competition; its language is now dominated by talk of market shares of international students and global league tables. So complete has been this reversal of perceptions of, and practices in, international higher education, that it passes almost without comment.

The major reason for this reversal has been the impact on higher education of the so-called "neo-liberal turn," the drift away from the social markets and welfare states developed in the 20th century as a response to recession, depression, and world wars—and which, remarkably, survived the shocks of the 2008 financial crisis and subsequent global recession. In the United Kingdom, there is now a strong, if contestable, belief that the ideals of mass higher education—democracy, social justice, individual "improvement" in a still recognizable Victorian sense—are out of sync, out of sympathy, with the dominant ideas of our age: wealth generation, growth, and competitiveness. In a global setting the same has happened. The older ideals of international education—solidarity, development, mutual understanding—have been replaced by new market imperatives summed up in a much over-used word globalization.

#### THREE SHIFTS

The "neo-liberal turn" has many guises, from the rigidly ideological to the flexibly pragmatic. It is a broad church composed of true believers and outwardly conforming agnostics. For some, it must be embraced by higher education as the major, or perhaps only, driver of future development; for others, it must be accommodated as an inescapable but