

Transforming IR Education in Japan

Written by Misato Matsuoka

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MISATO MATSUOKA, JUL 7 2015

In recent years scholars have started to consider alternative approaches to the study of International Relations (IR). For example, the concept of “Global IR” was introduced at the International Studies Association (ISA), aiming to go “beyond its hitherto American and Western dominance” and call for “a universal, inclusive discipline”. Tickner and Wæver’s (2009) book on *International Relations Scholarship Around the World* adds to this trend.

Japan is no exception. The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) proposed in May 2013 the “Super Global” Universities (SGU) project, in addition to “Global 30” project, to reform higher education in Japan in a globalised era. The problem, as Inoguchi (2009) notes, is that “diversity without disciplinary integration...is one of the main features of the academic community in Japan” (Inoguchi 2009, p. 89). IR courses at Japanese universities are usually divided into two parts: “IR” and “Global Studies”, the former conducted in Japanese and the latter in English. However, while students are encouraged to take both courses, there is a clear difference in teaching and learning styles between “IR” and “Global Studies”. This disconnection indicates the limit of changing the Japanese educational system as a whole, maintaining the academic culture in Japan, and unveiling the institutional weakness of political science and IR.

This may also relate to the issue of the enclosed feature of Japanese culture, which is not only about separation among the disciplines but of language. The reason why the President of the Akita International University (AIU), Mineo Nakajima, established his school was because of the resistance he met when he tried to redesign the English language programme at the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies. As he expressed, “Japan is still an intellectually closed shop and changing an existing university system is difficult”. Additionally, although the Japanese terms *kokusaika* (internationalisation) and *gurobaru-ka* (globalisation) became trendy concepts in educational discourse in Japan, there is a lack of consensus about the exact meaning of these concepts. As Roger Goodman mentions, these terms can be regarded as “multivocal symbols” which are capable of being interpreted in multiple ways by different actors (Goodman 2007). This may be why “IR” and “Global Studies” are rarely put together, taking into account the preferences for conducting lectures or seminars either in Japanese or English.

In Japan, “liberal arts” has become one element of change in Japanese higher education along with the English-medium instruction (EMI) style of teaching. International Christian University and the Faculty of Liberal Arts (formerly Comparative Culture) at Sophia University have offered programmes in English since the postwar era. They have been joined by other Japanese universities including the University of Tokyo (Graduate School of Interdisciplinary Studies) and Waseda University (the School of International Liberal Arts). The AIU and Ritsumeikan Asia-Pacific University are two other examples of Japanese universities which were recently established with a primary focus on “internationalisation”. For instance, AIU was created in 2004 with the mission to achieve by means of “International Liberal Arts” and promote liberal arts education in face of globalisation.

Classes in liberal arts that are conducted in English have been regarded as a key trend in Japanese higher education. With this emerging education setting, there seems to be more space for developing IR education by exploring various disciplines. According to Moon, “A rich liberal arts context encourages creative and innovative ways of analyzing historical or theoretical writings and current affairs...IR needs to adopt heterodoxy as a way to counter the atomization of subjects and methods” (Moon 2014, p. 146). IR does not need to be defined as a narrow subfield in politics, but an interconnecting constellation with cultural, social, economic, and linguistic implications. It is

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the production of “relations international” (Sylvester 1997) consisting of the elements of gender and relations among ethnic/racial groups.

The more diverse range of subjects in the liberal arts approach will enable students to go beyond American and Western orthodoxies by exploring the history and culture of their own societies (among other things). In this regard, in the setting of liberal arts where various disciplines intermingle, each individual has higher chances to educate IR in Japan by identifying multiple disciplines, raising opportunities for learners and teachers.

About the author:

Misato Matsuoka is an Early Career Fellow at the Institute of Advanced Study (IAS) at the University of Warwick. She submitted her PhD thesis entitled “Moving Beyond (Traditional) Alliance Theory?: a Neo-Gramscian Approach to the U.S.-Japan Alliance” in September 2014. Her research interests include International Relations theories, security studies, Japanese foreign policymaking, regional security in the Asia-Pacific region and domestic politics in Japan.