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**Misinformation and Polarization in Japan:
The Suga Administration and the Science Council of Japan**

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Attack on Democratic Practices

Two weeks into the new Suga administration, the future of Japan's democracy is uncertain. Prime Minister Suga refused to appoint six of the 105 candidates nominated for the Science Council of Japan (SCJ), in a reversal of a longstanding government practice of not intervening in the appointment of Council members.

Although members were initially chosen by election from among scholars throughout Japan following the creation of the SCJ in 1949, eventually the excesses of the electoral campaign became a problem. Thus, since 1984, members have been nominated by the SCJ itself. Under the Science Council of Japan Act, the candidates nominated by the SCJ are then appointed to office by the Prime Minister. The interpretation of the article, from initial Diet discussions in 1983 until today, has been that the Prime Minister's role is purely an official one and that he does not reject the chosen candidates. This is a democratic practice maintained in order to preserve the independence of the SCJ and allow it to make objective recommendations to the government.

Suga nonetheless declined to appoint six of the current candidates. All six are scholars of the humanities and social sciences who had expressed opposition to key policies of the Abe administration such as the 2013 State Secrecy Act and the 2015 Security Laws. It is highly probable that Suga, who held the position of Cabinet Secretary throughout the Abe administration, refused to appoint these scholars on the basis of ideology.

Academics and the general public have been asking for an explanation of the rationale behind the rejection of these nominees and requesting the retraction of this decision, arguing that this intervention constitutes a violation of the very foundations of Japan's democracy. As of the time

of this writing, the Suga administration has consistently refused to do either. In response to this case of governmental threat to academic freedom, transparency, and accountability, a petition campaign launched by university professors gathered more than 143,000 signatures.¹ Over 600 academic associations have published statements describing the rejection of the nominations as problematic. The hashtag "We protest the intrusion into the personnel issues of the Science Council of Japan" has been shared on more than 11,000 tweets as of November 16, 2020.²

However, misinformation to the detriment of the SCJ was disseminated to such an extent that shortly after the rejection of the nomination, it had become difficult to grasp the true nature of the issue. As a consequence, many have come to have misperceptions of the SCJ, and voices critical of the Council have spread.

The actors who disseminated the misinformation include politicians, TV commentators, and writers, using platforms ranging from TV to blogs, Twitter, and YouTube. The content of the misinformation covers two major areas: generating the impression that the SCJ as an organization clings to vested interests, and that the SCJ is an anti-Japan and pro-China organization.

Misinformation on Vested Interests of the SCJ

Four days after the rejection of the appointment, Fumio Hirai, a senior commentator for Fuji Television, misinformed the public on a Fuji TV program by saying that if scholars work for the SCJ for six years, they will receive a lifetime pension of 2.5 million yen per annum. This misinformation gave the erroneous impression that the academics who challenged the rejection of the appointment were clamoring for the pension as their vested interest. This misinformation was circulated on right-wing curation sites such as *Anonymous Post* and *Share News Japan*, and a number of videos were uploaded to YouTube and rapidly spread on Twitter.³ The protest that this was misinformation was immediately raised from many quarters, and Fuji TV corrected the information on air the next day, but the correction itself also contained misleading information.⁴

On October 2, Akihisa Nagashima, a member of the House of Representatives from the governing Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), tweeted similar misinformation. Together with a claim

¹ "Call on Prime Minister Suga to withdraw His Rejection of the Appointment of Science Council of Japan Members!" [in Japanese], Change.org.

<https://www.change.org/p/%E8%8F%85%E9%A6%96%E7%9B%B8%E3%81%AB%E6%97%A5%E6%9C%AC%E5%AD%A6%E8%A1%93%E4%BC%9A%E8%AD%B0%E4%BC%9A%E5%93%A1%E4%BB%BB%E5%91%BD%E6%8B%92%E5%90%A6%E3%81%AE%E6%92%A4%E5%9B%9E%E3%82%92%E6%B1%82%E3%82%81%E3%81%BE%E3%81%99>

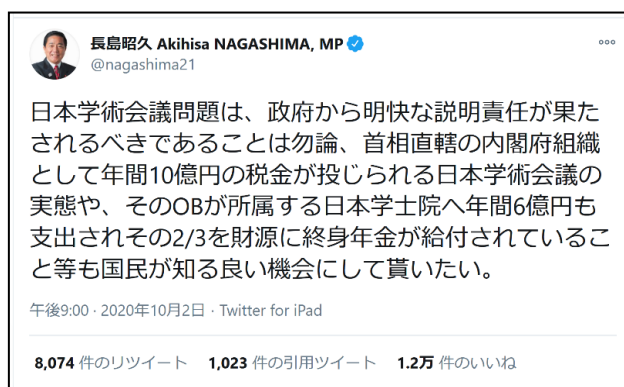
² Survey using Buzzsumo conducted by the author, November 16, 2020.

³ As of November 18, 2020, *Anonymous Post* has published 97 articles about the SCJ.

⁴ Kota Hatachi, "They will Receive a Lifetime Pension of 2.5 Million Yen per Annum if They Work for Six Years in the SCJ' is Wrong. Broadcast on Fuji TV and disseminated on the Internet" [in Japanese], *BuzzFeed News* (October 5, 2020). <https://www.buzzfeed.com/jp/kotahatachi/de6kutode250onumademoraeruharihuziterebiganettode>

that a large amount of taxpayer money is invested in the SCJ and thus the Council should be subject to public scrutiny, his tweet further aggravated the misperception that the SCJ is an organization with vested interests. Nagashima later corrected the misinformation, but the tweet has been retweeted more than 9,000 times and has 12,000 likes as of November 18, 2020 (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Akihisa Nagashima's Misinformation Tweet



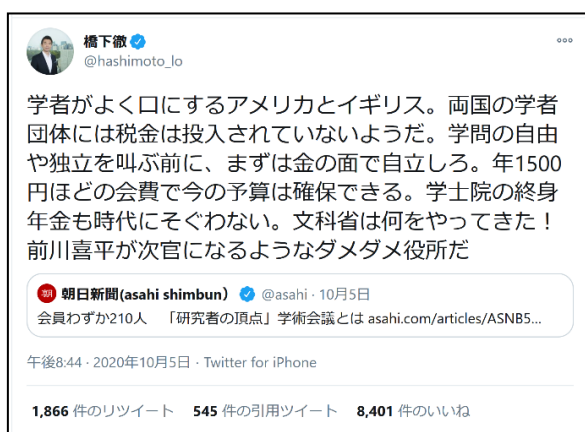
Source: Akihisa Nagashima's Twitter page (October 2, 2020).

<https://twitter.com/nagashima21/status/1312195682728439808> (accessed on November 20, 2020).

The impression of the SCJ as an organization clinging to vested interests was further reinforced by former Osaka Governor Toru Hashimoto comment on Twitter which gave the impression that the Council's status of being funded by taxpayer money is unusual. On October 5, Hashimoto tweeted that the SCJ's counterparts in the UK and the US do not receive taxpayer money, and criticized the SCJ stating it should "stand on its own feet in terms of money before calling for academic freedom and independence" (Figure 2). In reality, however, both the National Academy of Sciences in the US and The Royal Society in the UK, counterparts of the SCJ, are funded by public monies.⁵ Hashimoto did not admit that his tweet had misinformation, but an hour later he tweeted a correction, saying that his tweet had not been fully explained. His tweet with this misinformation has received more than 8,400 likes as of November 18, 2020.

⁵ Yuto Chiba, "No Taxpayer Money is Spent on Academic Organizations in the US and the UK is wrong. Statement by Toru Hashimoto over the SCJ spreads" [in Japanese], *BuzzFeed News* (October 12, 2020). <https://www.buzzfeed.com/jp/yutochiba/gakujutukaigi-fact-check-2>

Figure 2. Toru Hashimoto's Misinformation Tweet



Source: Toru Hashimoto's Twitter page (October 5, 2020).

https://twitter.com/hashimoto_lo/status/1313278992619692032 (accessed on November 20, 2020).

Furthermore, the right-wing YouTube channel Front Japan Sakura disinformed the public by stating that the SCJ is a pressure group that is reallocating 4 trillion yen of grants-in-aid for scientific research (*kakenhi*).⁶ However, the actual budget for the *kakenhi* hovers around 200 billion yen per year,⁷ and the SCJ has no influence over decisions on its allocation.⁸ This video has not corrected the disinformation and has been viewed more than 40,000 times as of November 18, 2020. A clip which features only this disinformation was tweeted and has been retweeted more than 1,500 times so far.⁹

Misinformation about the SCJ as an Anti-Japanese and Pro-China Organization

The second type of misinformation going around is the allegation that the SCJ is complicit in China's military research while prohibiting military research domestically. Reflecting on its complicity in research during the world wars, the SCJ issued a statement in 1950, shortly after its establishment, that it would "never conduct scientific research for the purpose of wars," and more

⁶ "1/2 [Front Japan Sakura] Can we "Abolish"? The SCJ/Go Taiwan, with Support from Europe [Sakura R2/10/12]" [in Japanese], YouTube (October 12, 2020). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jS10DxQzP4k>

⁷ "'The SCJ Reallocates Kakenhi Budget of 4 Trillion Yen' is Wrong. The Internet Laments, "We can Make a Science-based Country with 4 Trillion"" [in Japanese], *Huffington Post* (October 14, 2020). https://www.huffingtonpost.jp/entry/story_jp_5f866842c5b6c4bb5470e9d0

⁸ Japan Society for the Promotion of Science, "Government's 2020 Budget Proposal for the Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research (Kakenhi)" [in Japanese]. https://www.jsps.go.jp/j-grantsinaid/06_jsps_info/g_191223/index.html

⁹ Take5's Misinformation on Twitter. <https://twitter.com/akasyiigaremus/status/131562942444760064> (accessed on November 20, 2020).

recently, in 2017, it issued a statement affirming the 1950 decision.¹⁰ The first half of the misinformation above stems from this fact. However, the SCJ does not have the authority to impose a ban on military-related research in universities, and thus this information is misleading at best.¹¹

However, further misinformation on this issue has been circulating on the internet. On October 5, Professor Emeritus Tadashi Narabayashi of Hokkaido University, a board member of the conservative Japan Institute for National Fundamentals, posted on both the institute's website and the Twitter account the piece of misinformation that the SCJ had forcibly cancelled military-related research at Hokkaido University. This has been retweeted more than 13,000 times, and was quoted by the *Sankei Shimbun*, *Gendai Business*, and *Daily Sports*. Although the think tank corrected this article on October 12, the spread of the initial misinformation has not stopped.¹²

In addition, Yoshiko Sakurai, president of the Japan Institute for National Fundamentals, falsely stated on BS Fuji Prime News on October 14 that National Defense Academy graduates have been rejected by universities even if they want to attend graduate school.¹³ This misinformation spread the impression that the SCJ has been forcing Japanese universities to contain Japan's military research and military personnel.

These rumors were bolstered by another piece of misinformation which alleged that the SCJ is cooperating with China's Thousand Talents Plan. Thousand Talents is a plan by the Chinese government to invite outstanding researchers from various countries to work or conduct research in China, and its unparalleled treatment has raised international suspicion that it may be encouraging technology leakage, theft, and espionage. The source of this misinformation is believed to be a blog posted on August 6 by LDP House of Representatives member Akira Amari.¹⁴ However, it is not factual that the SCJ cooperates with China's Thousand Talents Plan, which was confirmed by Chief Cabinet Secretary Katsunobu Kato in a press conference on October 12.¹⁵ Amari slightly revised the content of the blog, but not only did he not explicitly deny SCJ's cooperation with the Thousand Talents plan, he modified the blog content without widespread notification of the change.¹⁶

This misinformation spread rapidly, and Amari's blog entry has been posted on 34 Facebook

¹⁰ The SCJ, "On Military Security Studies" [in Japanese] (April 2018).

<http://www.scj.go.jp/ja/member/iinkai/gunjianzen/pdf/gaiyou.pdf>

¹¹ Yuto Chiba and Kota Hatachi, "A Senior Member of the SCJ 'Barged into the President's Office of Hokkaido University and Forced to Withdraw from the Study' is incorrect. Article Corrected, but Misinformation spreads" [in Japanese], *BuzzFeed News* (October 13, 2020). <https://www.buzzfeed.com/jp/yutochiba/gakujutukaigi-fact-check-3>

¹² Ibid.

¹³ InFact, "[FactCheck] 'The University of Tokyo and other universities turn them down, even if Defense University graduates want to go to graduate school,' is not true, Sakurai's comment spreads" [in Japanese] (October 15, 2020). <https://infact.press/2020/10/post-9066/>

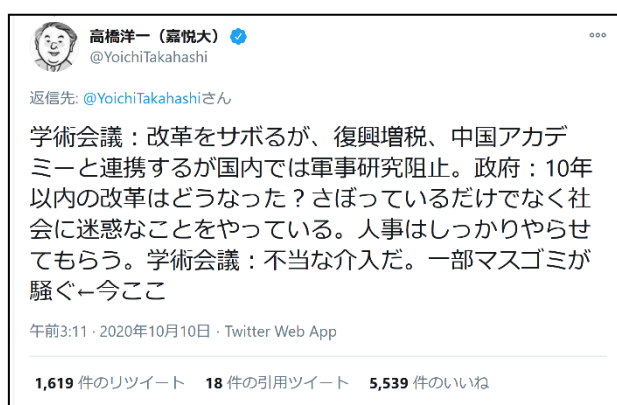
¹⁴ Akira Amari, "Diet Report No. 410" [in Japanese] (August 6, 2020). https://amari-akira.com/01_parliament/2020/410.html

¹⁵ Prime Minister's Office of Japan, "Chief Cabinet Secretary Press Conference, Monday morning, October 12, 2020" [in Japanese]. https://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/tyoukanpress/202010/12_a.html

¹⁶ Kota Hatachi, "LDP Amari Quietly Revises his Blog, Stating that the SCJ 'Actively Cooperates with China's Thousand Talent Plan'" [in Japanese], *BuzzFeed News* (October 12, 2020). <https://www.buzzfeed.com/jp/kotahatachi/thousand-talents-plan-2>

pages as of November 16, 2020. Most of these are right-wing groups such as “Japan’s National Interest” (*Nihon no kokueki wo kangaeru*) and right-wing media outlets such as *Toranomon News* and *Unreported Facts (Hodo sarenai jijitsu)*, with more than 2,800 interactions on Amari’s blog on Facebook alone. In addition, a YouTube video disseminating the disinformation that the SCJ is cooperating with the Thousand Talents Plan was uploaded on October 3, 2020, and as of the time of this writing on November 19, 2020, it had been viewed over 550,000 times with more than 20,000 likes.¹⁷ An October 7 article in *Zakzak*, a media outlet run by *Fuji Evening News*, carried a similar statement by the writer Ryusho Kadota.¹⁸ In addition, even Yoichi Takahashi, a Special Advisor to the Cabinet, misleadingly tweeted, “Science Council: ditching reform, but raising taxes for reconstruction, collaborating with the Chinese Academy but preventing military research in Japan” (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Yoichi Takahashi’s Misleading Tweet



Source: Yoichi Takahashi’s Twitter.

<https://twitter.com/YoichiTakahashi/status/1314825914849529856> (Accessed on November 20, 2020).

The Manifestation of Polarization

The FactCheck Initiative Japan, as well as its member organizations *BuzzFeed News*, *Mainichi Shimbun*, and *InFact*, took the proliferation of this misinformation seriously and conducted a flurry of fact checks on questionable information about the SCJ, which resulted in the publication of

¹⁷ Tsukasa Jonen, "A Scathing Criticism of the SCJ by Researchers and Professors. 'Japan's Advanced Science Defense Measures' are conducted for 'Thousand Talents Plan'," *YouTube* [in Japanese] (October 3, 2020). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X_zvYah8ZAs

¹⁸ "The SCJ is the One that has been Infringing on 'Academic Freedom,' Declares Ryusho Kadota!" [in Japanese], *Zakzak* (October 7, 2020). <https://www.zakzak.co.jp/soc/news/201007/pol2010070002-n2.html>

correct information. As the corrections have been widely disseminated through aggregator sites such as Yahoo! Japan, the population that perceives the misinformation as such has also expanded. However, as Chris Walker points out, misinformation spreads at an astonishingly rapid rate compared to accurate information,¹⁹ and misinformation about the SCJ issue has already become entrenched in a certain segment of the population.

The sequence of confusion surrounding the SCJ reveals the polarization that has already deepened in Japan to a significant degree. In the traditional mass media, *Sankei Shimbun* ran articles on the problems within the SCJ, while *Asahi* and *Mainichi Shimbun* continued to run articles on the rejection of the appointments as a serious issue for academic freedom and democracy. Among the new media, the conservative media outlets *JBPRESS* and *Anonymous Post* published articles with misinformation about the SCJ, while *BuzzFeed News* churned out one article after the other fact-checking the same misinformation. While large numbers of people have followed websites, Twitter, and YouTube videos containing misinformation, hashtags criticizing the government's rejection of the appointments have also been shared in large numbers.

The media and the general public were already divided over various allegations surrounding former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe during his administration. However, the polarization was revealed much more clearly over the SCJ issue which was received by certain groups as a class struggle rather than a mere ideological conflict. The misinformation that aroused suspicion about the SCJ was impactful because a broad swath of the population saw the use of taxpayer money for the Council, together with its efficiency and trustworthiness, as more important than the government intervention. Those who view the issue through the lens of class struggle overlap to a significant degree with those who perceive themselves as socially exploited. These people are opposed to the SCJ, to academics, and to the mass media that support the Council on this issue, perceiving them altogether as a class of the "haves" possessing both high income and output opportunities through the media.

Future Dangers

The SCJ issue illuminates two major dangers Japan's democracy is facing. The first is further erosion of the government's democratic norms and practices. The government's control of personnel affairs has tightened since the Abe administration, and the government has interfered even in areas

¹⁹ Chris Stokel-Walker, "Fake News Travels Six Times Faster Than the Truth on Twitter," *NewScientist* (March 8, 2018). <https://www.newscientist.com/article/2163226-fake-news-travels-six-times-faster-than-the-truth-on-twitter/>

where independence is critical, such as the judiciary and the media (NHK). The intervention in the SCJ is an extension of this tightening, and carries the implication that the government might attempt to further suppress criticism through increased personnel interventions in the future. These violations of democratic norms and practices will have a negative impact on Japan's democratic system itself. It is thus reasonable that scholars and the broader public demand both an explanation and a reversal, as they fear that the intervention will lead to further violations of academic freedom and democracy in the mid to long-term.

The second danger is the further polarization of Japanese society. The economic disparity in Japan, which has been increasing under the implementation of neoliberal economic policies since the 1990s, has been the fundamental factor underlying this polarization. The growing economic disparity caused by the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to exacerbate social polarization in the future. Redressing polarization through effective countermeasures against disinformation and redistribution policies are key to the future of Japan's democracy.

In the United States and elsewhere, there are countless examples of social chaos caused by disinformation and polarization. It is imperative that the Japanese government urgently address both dis/misinformation and polarization to prevent the deterioration of populism and social confusion. ■

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