

New academic year begins with student activists and Hōsei University staff clashing at campus entrance

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In Japan, April is far from the cruellest month and perhaps rather the most optimistic, not least because it heralds the cherry blossom and the start of the new fiscal and academic year.

I recently had the somewhat unnerving experience of ploughing through a scrum of undergraduates on a crowded campus in central Tokyo that had transformed into a temporary bazaar: it was the first week of the spring semester at Sophia University and everywhere one turned, tables were vying for freshers' attention, competing to sign students up for their respective clubs. Many were dressed in a certain "costume", be it the appropriate gear or uniform for a sports or outdoor activities club, or something more outlandish and incongruous if the club simply wanted to pique interest.

But something was missing amidst all this jingle-jangle of the stalls: politics. At almost all universities in Japan, especially the private colleges, one effectively cannot find student clubs linked to major political parties, nor, as was once standard, officially permitted student organisations associated with the New Left factions.

Let's travel from Sophia's campus at Yotsuya to nearby Ichigaya, where another major private university, Hōsei, has its main campus. Hōsei has been locked in a conflict with left-wing student activists for over ten years. A traditional stronghold for the group commonly known as Chūkaku-ha (Central Core Faction) and its student wing, Zengakuren, the dispute started in 2006 when students' signboards with political messages were removed from campus. That might seem minor enough but it exemplified a widespread attempt, especially since the 1990s, to cleanse campuses of far-left groups and remove the student clubs that would disseminate ideology and recruit new activists from bases on the grounds and at dormitories. Similar efforts took place at Waseda, Meiji and other universities. What was at stake here was the politicisation of students: the administrators want students to take part in extracurricular activities, but heaven forbid that those are political in nature.

In Hōsei's case, the clash centres on Bunka Renmei (Culture League), a student circle that is a de facto branch of Zengakuren but is no longer given official recognition by Hōsei. Students who protested what the university was doing, such as by tearing down notices, were suspended or arrested. The Hōsei dispute has, over the course of its meandering history, seen well over 100 arrests (sometimes the same students detained multiple times) and regular protests near its main campus. At its peak between 2006 and 2009, and again around 2012, a series of boisterous protests both on and around the main campus led to physical fights between activists and police or university security staff. Students were forcibly dragged off the campus. The TV news captured scenes of scores of police officers charging into the university. The non-student wings of Chūkaku-ha even joined in the fray, resulting in packed rallies featuring hundreds of people along the banks of the

Outer Moat. Some of the footage is quite startling, given the anaemic reputation of Japanese universities.

Though more serious charges were brought against a handful of students, the arrests in more recent years have often been for quite trivial offences and often did not result in indictments. Nonetheless, the situation remains tense and even now activists are sometimes taken into police custody, largely as a deterrent or way of asserting the university's authority.

This video charts a basic yet relatively lucid chronology of the Hōsei conflict, from the Zengakuren perspective. Naturally, the university will have quite different footage in its own archive, but regardless of a viewer's political leaning, the shots of staff hitting and pulling students are pretty damning. The university hates the militancy and "bad image" the activists present, and previously engaged in a public war of words with them. These days, however, it keeps silent in the face of activists' taunts online and in print. In response to the spats, however, security measures intensified, including new guards and surveillance cameras. This merely served as further proof for Zengakuren that the university is emblematic of a neoliberal paradigm whereby education is privatised, commercialised and authoritarian.

Left-wing activism is part of Hōsei's culture and heritage, as any glance at the 1960s and 1970s will reveal. Arguably what is happening today is only a fresh strain of this legacy, albeit curbed by the overall poverty of the student movement in Japan and the direct policies of the university. Hōsei has become an interstitial space of radical activism: neither its former glory, nor phased out completely, it occupies a kind of rowdy yet ghostly limbo.

Whenever the Zengakuren activists — usually led by ex-students from Hōsei — now appear, they are certainly not allowed on campus. Just one step over the entrance might well be enough to merit an arrest. University staff monitor the activists doggedly with cameras, while the activists likewise film their surveyors. Somewhere in between this barrage of lenses, ordinary students come and go, perhaps bemused by the spectacle.

What transpired on 7 April demonstrates the current situation. An activist was removed from the campus grounds at the entrance to the university. This brief confrontation climaxed with a member of staff seizing and throwing down a Bunka Renmei flag. The student who took the flag onto the campus is not, apparently, one of the activists who has been suspended or expelled, and thus within his rights to enter the grounds. Nonetheless, the activists knew full well that they were testing a new boundary here and no doubt also hoped to provoke a response that would give them the moral high ground when the student was inevitably ejected ("Look! The oppressors of student activism strike again!"). The video's captions, at any rate, indicate that fellow students were clapping and calling out encouragement. Of course, whether this is genuine sympathy, caustic mocking or amusement at the diversion is a matter of debate.

What I find most intriguing about this, though, is the video itself, which veers from denunciation to jest — and almost self-parody — through its use of a soundtrack, intertitles, speeding-up and image inserts. We might suggest that Zengakuren and Bunka Renmei accepts and plays up to its role as part of the campus entertainment: a disruptive yet tacitly enjoyed and even permitted force.

This is not an exclusive occurrence. Much of the way that Zengakuren presents itself now, particularly its activism at Kyoto University and the Zenshin Channel series of YouTube videos, is similarly tongue-in-cheek and playful while nonetheless utterly sincere. Driven by activists born in the late 1980s and 1990s, it reveals the impact of a generation of looser *freeter* activism in the Heisei period; it is dogma without the customary poker face. Interestingly, while the likes of SEALDs bespoke a post-Fukuyama mode, not least in its ideology (or lack thereof), it was by and large

“serious”. These “cute” affectations of Zengakuren would surely be, to SEALDs’ digitally savvy eyes, *dasai* (uncool), but they actually seem to concur with the broader idiosyncrasies of Heisei-era activism in Japan on the left (or far left). Earlier this month, for instance, I noted a comparable trait in a quite different section of the radial spectrum, where activists linked to the Sanya slum area of Tokyo mixed images of cats with condemnation of the police for an unlawful arrest.

Despite all the fanfare and deserved attention, SEALDs, which drew much of its core membership from affluent private colleges like Sophia and Meiji Gakuin, lasted little more than a year. The exact circumstances behind its disbanding are quite sensible and practical, so the length of its life should not be the only yardstick we use to judge it. After all, its influence on subsequent youth and even established activist groups is evident, and some of the most prominent SEALDs activists have returned to the fore at the recent National Diet rallies against the government as the Moritomo cronyism scandal continues to unfold. Aki Okuda’s notable presence at the big rally at the Diet on 14 April, which organisers claim drew 50,000 people and saw demonstrators overrun police barriers, is a case in point.

On the other hand, the campus remains a neglected site. In this vein, under the leadership of former Hōsei student Ikuma Saitō, Zengakuren is almost alone in diligently pursuing efforts to rebuild the student movement in Japan, cultivating engagement with politics at such universities as Hōsei, Kyoto, Okinawa and Tōhoku.

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