

Special Feature

COVID-19 and the University: The End of Internationalization as a Collective Fantasy

Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto

The impact of COVID-19 on Japanese universities has been extensively discussed and written about, even though, as of this writing, the pandemic is not yet over. What lasting impact COVID-19 will have on Japan's higher education remains to be seen. While the novel coronavirus pandemic may make us see various problems that were not clearly perceptible in the pre-pandemic situation, it can also function as an instrument of deception. That is to say, COVID-19 may create a false impression that those problems are a negative effect of the pandemic when in fact they existed long before the virus spread globally. Despite the uncertainty surrounding the post-COVID University, what is already clear is that the global pandemic is forcing us to confront the fundamental problems with so-called internationalization (国際化) in Japanese universities. What exactly is internationalization? How can the University be internationalized? Why is it necessary to internationalize the University? What is the specific goal of internationalization?

At the height of the pandemic, Japan and many other nations temporarily turned into walled states. With some exceptions, the movement of people crossing national borders was blocked. This meant that Japanese students could not go to other countries through their home institutions' study abroad programs, and that no international students and scholars were able to come to Japan to study or conduct research. Although virtually all Japanese universities that claim to be promoting internationalization were negatively affected by border closure, those with a large number of international students were hardest hit by the pandemic. Yet we should not hastily conclude from this fact that COVID-19 inevitably hindered the internationalization of Japanese universities. When university campuses were under lockdown, teaching and research were carried on through massive utilization of digital devices and online resources. Despite their limitations, the Internet and digital technologies opened up new pedagogical and research

possibilities that allowed many universities to uphold their missions as institutions of higher education.

Nonetheless, taking online courses offered by a foreign university is not the same as actually going to that university to enroll in face-to-face courses. Attending an online film class offered by a university in Los Angeles from a small apartment in Takadanobaba at 3 a.m. is not the same as commuting from Santa Monica to the actual campus, attending a film class, having lunch with friends and professors at an on-campus cafeteria, etc. In other words, there is nothing illusionary about a sense of frustration felt by both students and instructors in virtual classes.

Can we say that the global scale travel ban enforced in the wake of COVID-19 resulted in the temporary interruption of internationalization of Japanese universities? Put differently, once the national borders are reopened and students from other countries come to Japan, can the project of internationalization just take up where it left off? The answer may be “yes” if the internationalization of the University in Japan is measured, for instance, by the number of Japanese and international students crossing Japan’s national border every year. Or some may say that the creation of an “international atmosphere” on university campuses is an important or even primary aspect of internationalization. However, the number of border-crossing students and the campus environment are at best an indirect indicator or incidental by-product of internationalization. Otherwise, it would be difficult to distinguish the University from the travel agency or sightseeing attraction for foreign tourists.

If we shift our attention to research, internationalization can be schematically discussed in terms of the three categories: empty ritual, well-intended cooperation, and agonistic dialogue. (Here I am primarily thinking of the humanities, so that the following discussion is not intended for social sciences and certainly not applicable to hard sciences.) So-called international symposiums and conferences are regularly held in Japan. Here the word “international” is an empty sign, merely indicating the presence of some presenters from outside Japan as “guest speakers.” These foreign speakers are clearly marked as transient visitors. Not part of the inner dynamics of a domestic scholarly community or association, they are simultaneously regarded as indispensable and expendable. Put differently, they are treated as a key element of internationalization as an empty ritual, a one-time event whose value lies solely in the fact that it in fact took place. Meanwhile, international collaborative research of many kinds — either organized by groups of individual scholars or institutions situated in two or more countries — belongs to the second category, “well-intended cooperation,” although some of them may properly be classified as the first type. The second type is usually more substantive projects which often involve scholars from multiple countries as co-investigators — not guest

speakers — over a longer period. However, these well-intended international projects often end up becoming an empty ritual on a larger scale. It is difficult to avoid repeating the ritual of collaboration for collaboration's sake or resist the temptation to do something primarily for the purpose of producing the documented record on an international event that is required by its financial sponsors or will be later used for public relations purposes. The third type, "agonistic dialogue," starts with the understanding that the idea of international collaboration is fraught with problems. The Japanese University as a research institution has its specific institutional history, research traditions, academic language, professional protocols, and social mandate. So do universities in other countries. Burdened by political, economic, and historical baggage, the relationship between universities or scholarly groups from different countries is never neutral. "Orientalism" is sometimes used as a convenient shorthand for a power/knowledge nexus, which regulates a global circulation of knowledge by acknowledging only particular types of ideas, inquiries, and discursive modes as legitimate and valuable. The objective of agonistic dialogue is not necessarily to construct a global platform for free exchange and circulation of knowledge but to strive for articulation of common ideas and interests despite the impossibility of constructing such a platform.

The global pandemic has made it clear that the idea of internationalization is not a solution to the real problems afflicting Japanese society but a constituting part of the prevalent social fantasy known under different names. The "Galapagos Syndrome" is one such name. Ivan Krastev, for instance, makes anecdotal reference to it in his discussion of the precarious idea of Europe as follows.

In recent years, Europeans have come to realize that although the EU's political model is admirable, it is unlikely to become universal or even spread to its immediate neighbors. This is a European version of the "Galapagos Syndrome" experienced by Japanese technology companies. A few years ago, these companies became aware that although Japan made the best 3G phones in the world, they could not find a global market because the rest of the world could not catch up with the technological innovations to use these "perfect" devices. Rather than being too big to fail, Japan's phones, developed in protected isolation from the challenges of the outside world, had become too perfect to succeed.¹

In a self-enclosed environment cut off from the outside world, a peculiar evolutionary path or mutation of technology can give rise to a unique product that is technologically advanced yet not particularly desired by people living outside that isolated environment. The baroque complexity of the product's design and technological specification may be

celebrated in an isolated national space. Yet in the global market, it has neither functional nor symbolic value. The Galapagos Syndrome ostensibly signifies Japan's inability to utilize its technological prowess to make state-of-the-art products that meet a specific need of the non-Japanese market. It has been argued that Japanese companies failed to become a global leader in communication technologies because their 3G phones, whose users gained an easy access to the Internet and could take high-quality digital photos in the pre-smartphone era, were too ahead of the times. Japanese 3G phones were too good to be successful, or put differently, simultaneously so advanced and already obsolete. But this is not exactly what the Galapagos Syndrome means. Less about what happened but more about interpretation of what happened, the Galapagos Syndrome is a contemporary myth. The emphasis is not placed on the fact of failure but on the alleged reason for failure. The Galapagos Syndrome is an expression of the Japanese social elites' sweet commiseration for themselves. It signifies the twisted coexistence of self-pride and self-pity, or a feeling of loneliness and a sense of satisfaction with one's peculiar uniqueness. The Galapagos Syndrome results in a perfect mode of existence for those who want to be recognized as singularly unique by people in the rest of the world yet have no strong desire to communicate or interact with the same people in any substantive fashion.

The idea of internationalization of Japanese universities has a close affinity with the Galapagos Syndrome. The constant call for and the disavowal of internationalization of the University are increasingly becoming indistinguishable. The sense of vacuity underlined by the contradictory desire for change and stasis is even becoming a source of cynical pleasure. It is important not to use COVID-19 as a means of reinforcing the Galapagos Syndrome in Japan's higher education. The expansion of study abroad and exchange programs or the increasing movement of students across national borders is an important issue for many universities. Yet neither of them touches on the critical core of internationalization as a truly transformative force. All academics, but especially those of us working in the humanities, have responsibility to thoroughly think through the idea of internationalization now.

Endnotes

- 1 Ivan Krastev, *After Europe*, updated edition (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), p. 9.