

Contemporary Cultural Representations of Japan's Education-Credential Society and the Affect of Disgust

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Abstract | In this article, I examine and critically assess representations of Japan's neoliberal-era "education-credential society" (*gakureki shakai*) in popular culture. First, I explore the manga *Dragon Zakura* (*Doragon zakura*, 2003-2007), in which a non-educator is entrusted to revive a financially ailing private high school by creating a specialized class preparing students to qualify for the University of Tokyo. This story reflects the reality of Japanese society in the 2000s, characterized by a decreasing student-age population—pushing private schools into financial crisis and leading to decline in student performance—and employment instability under neoliberalism. Second, I examine the novel based on true events *Because She's Brainless* (*Kanojo wa atama ga warui kara*, 2018), exploring its depiction of how university students' "deviation score" (*hensachi*) continues to impact their lives even after becoming university students, and its legitimization of meritocracy. Through these analyses, I show how the signifier known as the "University of Tokyo" is being consumed in Japan as a buffer against, and palliative for, the exhaustion of living in a society constantly demanding the proof of one's abilities through unlimited competition. Finally, I explore some recent critically acclaimed novels portraying the lives of women inhabiting a world where neither education credentials nor deviation scores have any significance. In criticizing the heritability of education credentials, these works evince not only a division in representations of Japan's education-credential society but also deep inequality irresolvable through the expansion of educational opportunities alone. This suggests the need to approach the issue of education-credential inequality by confronting the human vulnerability that persists beyond the reach of increased educational opportunities.

Keywords | education-credential society (*gakureki shakai*), meritocracy, *Dragon Zakura* (*Doragon zakura*), *Because She's Brainless* (*Kanojo wa atama ga warui kara*), deviation score (*hensachi*), University of Tokyo, representation, education-credential division

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Introduction: Literary Representations of “Education Credentials” amid the Decline of the “Mass Education Society”

In this article, I critically examine representations of Japan’s “education-credential society” (*gakureki shakai*) in contemporary literature. Why might literature provide a valuable lens to view the problems of education credentials? It would not be an exaggeration to say that the cultural representation of Japan’s education-credential society emerged together with modern Japanese literature. Futabatei Shimei’s *Floating Clouds* (*Ukigumo*, 1891), regarded as Japan’s first vernacular novel, begins with a description of government officials departing an office in Tokyo at the end of the day. The way the attire of the officials indicates their differing ranks hints at the emerging function of “education credentials” at the time. The novel’s protagonist Utsumi Bunzō is of an old aristocratic family that lost its Edo shogunate-provided stipend with the coming of the modern era. Devoting himself to his studies and graduating from a public school, Bunzō attains a position as a government official to support his family.

While education credentials certainly aid Bunzō in joining the bureaucracy, by no means do they ensure his perpetual employment. In the early Meiji period, advancement was entirely subject to the whims of one’s superior, as is well demonstrated when Bunzō is fired for failing to flatter his superior. Bunzō’s dismissal can be seen as a reflection of the prevailing milieu, in which education credentials and ability were not yet regarded as one and the same. In the following description of Bunzō’s department manager, however, it is difficult to miss the novel’s portrayal of Japan’s bureaucracy at the time as characterized by a strong aversion to feudalistic nepotism: “As one early accustomed to the fruits of Western civilization, he absolutely despised the words ‘aristocratic air’ (*tonosama fū*)” (Futabatei 1941, 68). In other words, Japan’s modern bureaucracy, created along with the introduction of the Western state system, demanded individuals with new “abilities,” not just a feudally inherited status, and this is the very reason that people began to seek out modern higher education institutions teaching literary Sinitic (*kanji*), foreign languages, and mathematics. In the protagonist Bunzō, who is unable to advance in the world despite joining the bureaucracy through diligent study, *Floating Clouds* critically represents the orientation of the prevailing milieu toward professional success based on education credentials. This commentary is all the more significant considering the novel’s status as the progenitor of modern Japanese literature.

Futabatei’s critical perspective was not merely a consequence of his attending Tokyo Imperial University, but his choosing to become a writer instead of a government official; indeed, Tokyo Imperial University would produce many a

writer after Futabatei. The significance of *Floating Clouds* can be rather explained in terms of how it reveals the close relationship between modern literature and education credentials. With the advent of the modern era, social criticism was impossible without achieving consistency between the written and spoken word as tool of critical representation and a command of foreign languages and classical Chinese. From great prewar literary figures Mori Ōgai and Natsume Sōseki to postwar Nobel laureates Kawabata Yasunari and Ōe Kenzaburō, most of the major figures recorded in the modern history of Japanese literature, then, were graduates of Tokyo Imperial University. As members of a kind of “education-credential aristocracy” (*gakureki kizoku*), in the words of Takeuchi Yō (2011, 254-302), these writers were greatly influential over postwar, not to mention prewar, self-cultivationism (*kyōyōshugi*). Shōji Kaoru (1973), who penned the Akutagawa Award-winning *Watch Out, Little Red Riding Hood* (*Akazukin-chan, ki o tsukete*) set against the intensifying student demonstrations leading to the cancellation of the University of Tokyo admission exam in February 1969, also belongs to this category. In his story of a high school senior at the prestigious Hibiya High School preparing for the University of Tokyo admission exam, Shōji criticized Japan's deeply rooted education-credential society.

Shōji based the protagonist “Shōji Kaoru” on himself, having also attended Hibiya High School prior to the introduction of the school district system. Shōji describes Hibiya High School after educational reform as follows: “Tests are administered only twice a year and the scores are not publicized, so top students are barred from ascertaining the very important knowledge of who is doing well and who is not.” Club and student-association activities have become livelier, he adds, with “great big orchestras always playing and strange magazines published here and there.” This sort of high school, in other words, was a “picture-perfect model [devoted to] realizing the education ideals of postwar democracy.” Shōji (1973, 93-96) viewed such education with suspicion: “High school students all over the nation wear expressions of complete indifference even amid the competition over university admission exams. Is this (even if just an expression) not an affront to the fierce contemporary competition for survival, an indescribable arrogance, and the kind of elite consciousness unforgivable in a democratic society?”

Sympathizing with Zenkyōtō's (Zengaku Kyōtō Kaigi; All-Campus Joint Struggle Committees) critique of postwar democracy, in the novel, Shōji rejects the implementation of education without first addressing the struggle for survival itself. Declining even to take the university admission exam, he states the following: “The intellect as I see it is really something free. As it is com-

pletely unrelated to university or college, would not it be rather strange to tremble in shock at the announcement of the cancellation of the University of Tokyo admission exam, which I had only determined to take by chance (indeed, by good fortune)?" (Shōji 1973, 39, 93-96). By questioning the commonly understood interchangeability of education credentials and "intellect," the novel reveals just how important education credentials are to Japanese society. Yet perhaps Shōji's "pride" over his decision also has to do with the author's background as a University of Tokyo graduate.

Japanese writers have thus reproduced the problem of an "education-credential society" in their work. The issue of university admission exam competition, however, would not come to the fore again for some time after Shōji's novel. This was likely due to the high rate of high school enrollment in the 1970s and the implementation of "yutori education" (*yutori kyōiku*), a more relaxed approach to education, devised by the Japan Teacher's Union in the 1980s. The most decisive factor in this regard, however, was the advent of Japan's "mass-education society" in the 1980s. With the acceptance of a "middle class of 100 million" (*ichi oku sō chūryū*) as a fait accompli, the "mass-education society" promised "education open to any class [of person], in which anyone could place high value on education regardless of their social status" (Kariya 1995, 12-13). In this milieu, the domination of Japanese literature by male graduates of prestigious universities also began to wane, allowing space for writers of diverse backgrounds, including women and foreigners.

In the 1990s, rather than the university admission exam or education credentials, Japanese literature and cultural discourse focused on the issue of "educational collapse" amid growing concern over *ijime* (bullying), youth crime, and dropout rates.¹ While perhaps education oriented toward humanism rather than the relentless pursuit of education credentials was not itself greatly problematic, the sensitive reaction of writers who had emphasized "humanity" over teachers' loss of authority in the classroom and student violence was perfectly understandable.

The work which ignited a full-fledged public debate over the issues of declining student performance and the "education credential gap," as part of a more general critique of yutori education, was *Dragon Zakura* (*Doragon zakura*), a manga published by Morning KC from 2003 to 2007. The publication was also made into a live-action television drama in 2005. At the heart of this story is a private high school facing financial ruin after its deviation score (*hensachi*) has dropped to a rank of thirty-six. To turn this situation around, the

1. On *ijime*, see Yamada (1988). On youth violence, see Yu (1998) and Murakami (2002).

high school hires a lawyer and former motorcycle gang member Sakuragi Kenji to manage a specialized class for preparing students to gain admission to the University of Tokyo and “ascend to the apex of the education-credential society.” The manga garnered widespread attention for its open portrayal of education as a part of the “struggle for survival,” something that had been suppressed since Shōji Kaoru’s *Watch Out, Little Red Riding Hood*. It even spawned imitations like the film *Flying Colors* (*Biri gyaru*, 2015).

In this respect, it is a commonly accepted fact that university admission is a clear indicator of one’s level of education that determines one’s success in life. As university admission does not always fulfil this function, however, this “fact” is also a fiction to a certain extent. Then why only now has Japan reached a consensus over this fiction? The reason is that Japanese society has come to sympathize with the ideology of neoliberalism in which unlimited competition and self-responsibility are viewed as inevitable consequences of globalization.

For example, an article by Akagi Tomohiro published in the January 2007 edition of the magazine *Forum* (*Ronza*)—titled “I Want to Slap Maruyama Masao across the Face: Thirty-One-Year-Old Freeter.² Hope is War” (“*Maruyama Masao*” o hippa takitai: 31-sai, furitā. Kibō wa, sensō)—asked whether “distribution” in Japan was possible only in terms of disadvantages like war and insecurity and not advantages. The article is famous not only for highlighting the inequality of opportunity in Japanese society but also in effect declaring an end to the ideas of a “middle class of 100 million” and “postwar democracy” (Akagi 2007, 221). As discourses of disparity proliferated under this zeitgeist, education could not but be affected. How then has cultural discourse represented Japan’s “education-credential society” in the era of neoliberalism, and what is problematic about this representation?

With these questions in mind, in this article, I critically examine representations of Japan’s education-credential society in literature published since the 2000s, namely, the manga *Dragon Zakura* and the novel *Because She’s Brainless* (*Kanojo wa atama ga warui kara*, 2018). I reveal the problems of representing Japan’s education-credential society in these texts by comparing them with other novels published around the same time. Existing studies on the relationship between Japan’s education-credential society and literature have mainly focused on twentieth-century writers who were graduates of imperial-era high schools or Tokyo Imperial University, emphasizing the problems of elitism and inequality in Japanese society. In this article, rather than authors’

2. “Freeter” (*furitā*) is a Japanese term coined to refer to young people between fifteen and thirty-four years old, except students and housewives, who work or hope to work as part-time or non-regular workers.

backgrounds, I examine the contexts in which Japan's education-credential society as reproduced in literary works since the 2000s reflects "reality," and discuss the problems of such representation.

Declining Student Performance and the University of Tokyo Admission Exam: Japanese "Education" in the 2000s as Represented in *Dragon Zakura*

The manga *Dragon Zakura* highlights the problems of Japanese middle and high school education in the 2000s in the story of Ryūzan Academy, a private school facing financial ruin due to the decreasing student-age population in Japan. Originally founded as the Ryūka Women's Academy in 1948, the school changed its name in the late 1990s when it became a co-ed institution to attract more students. As part of this restructuring, it decided to strengthen its sports program, and with a large loan received with its land as collateral invests in new facilities including a gymnasium and stadium. Nevertheless, enrollment remained far lower than anticipated, and the resulting sharp decline in income meant the school could not pay the interest on the 240-million-yen loan, or the related property taxes. Finally, denied private school subsidies on the grounds of "unclear expenses," the school teeters on the brink of liquidation.

In this crisis caused by decreasing enrollment, the school seeks out lawyer Sakuragi Kenji to mediate between it and its creditors. Sakuragi recommends another restructuring over liquidation. To turn the school around, he argues, the school's focus must shift from sports to getting students into good universities, and he even volunteers to become the teacher of the specialized class created for this purpose.

Dragon Zakura's plot was groundbreaking at the time. Not only did it portray the effects of Japan's population decline, as manifesting first in classrooms over rural areas, but it also asserted the need for a new view of education in the neoliberal era. Indeed, considering that public debate over social and class disparities in education and over the "extinction of rural Japan" began in earnest in the mid-2000s and mid-2010s, respectively, one could say this manga catalyzed the revitalization of educational discourse in Japan.

It is of course true that the "collapse of education" had already been well represented in subcultures in the era of yutori education, perhaps best exemplified by the manga *Slam Dunk* (*Suramu danku*, 1999-96). Yet the problems in Japanese classrooms at this time were mostly understood as part of the social costs of "advancement." A perspective was thus lacking acknowledging

the onset of an all-round competitive system under globalization, the exacerbation of social disparities, and a decreasing school-age population threatening the very existence of schools. In contrast with yutori-era works, then, *Dragon Zakura* challenged the traditional views of educators by depicting the intervention of a non-educator—lawyer Sakuragi—in the classroom.

To “save” the private school in financial crisis, Sakuragi proposes that it become a “university admission high school” (*shingakukō*) that sends 100 students a year to the University of Tokyo. Teacher Takahara opposes this plan, arguing that the school “attract students by creating an environment nurturing respect for individuality and consideration of humanity.” Sakuragi counters by asking Takahara to “explain exactly what this ‘attractiveness,’ ‘individuality,’ and ‘humanity’ are, of which you speak,” adding that a school sending “100 students to the University of Tokyo” could be very “attractive.” This scene vividly depicts the confrontation of educators and non-educators over education. Representing the former, teacher Takahara emphasizes the need to keep competition out of education. Representing the latter, Sakuragi evinces the idea that “education is also a business. Could a market survive without meeting demand?” (Mita 2021, 89-90). The scene is also particularly remarkable in that it articulates the conflict over the future of Japanese education not in terms of the “collapse of the classroom” but the dissemination of neoliberalism on a global scale.

While the crisis at the Ryūzan Academy is certainly exaggerated for dramatic effect compared to the real crisis of education in Japan at the time, it is precisely such an extremely contrived fictional situation that effectively foregrounds the perspective of educators. In other words, against the depiction of a society mired in extreme competition, the effects of which have already penetrated classrooms, a teacher’s plea to keep competition out of education loses its persuasive power.

Of course, it is also easy to point out the fictitious nature of Sakuragi’s view, which takes for granted competition within education. According to Sakuragi, Japan has entered an era of unstable employment conditions created by neoliberalism in which even students who do gain admission to university must delay graduation for years to search for employment or give up getting a job altogether (Yamada 2007, 192-97). Even with the student-age population already declining in the mid-2000s, many still believed the “age of universal university enrollment” (*daigaku zennyū jidai*) had arrived. Yet as Kikkawa Tōru (2009, 17-26) points out, at this time “as little as half of high school students said they wanted to attend university.” As the myth that a university education guarantees stable employment began to fade, so too did the meaning of university admission. In this sense, not only does the “reality” reflected in *Dragon Zakura*,

in which Sakuragi argues for introducing the principle of competition into education, fail to show what competition outside the school is really like, it also deliberately conceals the problems of education. With such a fictional logic, why did this manga cause such a sensation, extending its influence even further as a live-action drama?

The answer to this question is related to the paradoxical reality of unstable employment. As obtaining stable employment becomes ever more difficult and students struggle only to end up in temporary positions or as part of the “NEET group” (*nīto-zoku*)³ that has completely given up on finding a job, the motivation to attend a prestigious university only becomes stronger. As Yamada Masahiro (2007, 208) observes, the onset of low growth after the collapse of the bubble economy eliminated the path to stable, respectable, and lucrative employment through university education. Therefore, he writes, “It has become necessary to enter a pipeline with few cracks to obtain a good job, that is, stable institutions with a high deviation score such as faculties of medicine. Competition over admission exams for certain universities and faculties has thus intensified” (208). It is precisely for this reason in *Dragon Zakura* that lawyer Sakuragi does not propose a policy of universal university enrollment but one in which students gain admission specifically to the University of Tokyo. Attending university has become meaningless but attending a prestigious university has become even more meaningful.

Notably, Sakuragi in no way describes the significance of gaining admission to the University of Tokyo in terms of guaranteeing a stable, high-paying job. In introducing the new special “university admission” class to students, Sakuragi rather argues the following: “There are rules in society, and one must live by these rules. ... [Yet] society’s rules are created by and to the advantage of intelligent people ... [who] deceive and swindle [those who do not use their brains].” In sum, for Sakuragi, studying is nothing more than a means necessary to avoid “deception” by the elites. If students have no other reason to study, then there is indeed little basis for attending university. Sakuragi himself attests to this, having become a lawyer by taking the bar exam without attending university.

Yet neither does Sakuragi ever present the students with a concrete motivation for gaining admission to the University of Tokyo. For him, their admission means little more than enhancing his reputation as lawyer for successfully reviving a school in financial crisis. The students thus must find out for themselves why they must attend the University of Tokyo. Ultimately, no

3. NEET is an acronym for “Not in Education, Employment, or Training.”

more than two students participate in the special class. Mizuno Naomi is the daughter of a bar-managing single mom and Yajima Yūsuke comes from a wealthy family but has a psychological complex over his highly successful elder brothers. In this regard, is this story little more than a reminder of the timeworn adage of educators that they can offer methods but not the motivation for entering the University of Tokyo?

Paradoxically, it is the methods for gaining admission to the University of Tokyo themselves that are important in *Dragon Zakura*. Most of *Dragon Zakura*'s content actually pertains to different study methods for gaining admission to the University of Tokyo. The story thus presumes the possibility of qualifying for the University of Tokyo through just a year of study. We might ask, is this really feasible?

Sakuragi argues that gaining admission to the University of Tokyo is no longer a "castle in the sky" as in the past. Employing about 3,200 full-time staff and faculty against a decreasing student population, the average qualifying score on the University of Tokyo admission exam has fallen annually (Mita 2021, 55). Furthermore, he emphasizes that tenacity and technique are more important than intelligence for the admission exam, meaning that gaining admission is feasible through repetitive training guided by a deliberate and meticulous strategy. In sum, Sakuragi asserts that, due to the decreasing student-age population and declining student performance, the "game" surrounding the university admission exam has shifted to such a degree that anyone can enter the University of Tokyo through individual effort supported by a coherent strategy and solid test-taking techniques.

Declining student performance has been a widely discussed social issue in Japan since the early 2000s. Particularly provocative in this regard was the revelation of Japan's declining scores in the 2006 OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) survey. In response, Prime Minister Abe proposed a policy of "post-yutori education" and established the "Committee for Education Rejuvenation" in 2007. Uchida Tatsuru (2013, no. 150/ 2977), who did not share Abe's political views but agreed with him about the severity of declining student performance, pointed out a psychological aspect of the decline: "The lower a student cohort's level of scholastic achievement, the less intense the competition. ... Japanese parents with school-age children [thus] unconsciously suppose their own children might actually reap the benefits of declining scholastic performance among other Japanese students."

Uchida observes that the unrestrained competition of neoliberalism within Japanese education has not led to improved but declining student performance

that has rather bred complacency among parents hoping to capitalize on this “opportunity.” This observation resonates with the common criticism that neoliberalism allows the state and society to evade responsibility by reducing all negative problems to individual responsibility. Even as concern increased over the relationship between state and society in the neoliberal era, the phenomenon of declining student performance seemingly passed with the introduction of the “national curriculum guidelines” (*gakushū sidō yōryō*) in 2011, marking the advent of the “post-yutori education era.” Over the past ten years or so, however, the average score of students qualifying for the University of Tokyo—excluding pre-med students—has continued its gradual decline (Utaisaku-web). In preemptively portraying just such a social context, *Dragon Zakura* suggests the practical validity of its “special class.”

Of course, qualifying for the University of Tokyo through a year’s worth of studying is still no easy feat, regardless of the degree of decline in student performance. While I will discuss this point further in the following section, suffice it to say for now that a great number of University of Tokyo students come from families of the upper economic and social tier who have been shaped from a young age to gain admission to a prestigious university, attending schools with first-rate teachers and “cram schools” (*juku*) specializing in strategies for gaining university admission. Considering this, Sakuragi’s experiment in *Dragon Zakura* is clearly a gamble with a very low probability of success.

Be that as it may, *Dragon Zakura*’s real social impact is difficult to ignore. Reorienting middle and high school education away from “instilling character” toward “university admission” could motivate students to learn. Even if the idea that anyone can gain admission to the University of Tokyo if only endowed with excellent teachers and an advantageous admission-exam studying strategy is overly simplistic, its sheer clarity may naturally appeal to students and their parents. Put differently, *Dragon Zakura* suggests just how complicated and opaque the goal of “instilling humanity” in middle and high school education was.

Of course, there is little chance that encouraging students to attend prestigious universities alone might resolve the education crisis in Japan, as represented by the ideas of the “collapse of the classroom” and declining student performance. The number of students that can attend these schools is always limited, and life after graduation is never assured even when one does gain admission. Yet perhaps affirming the desire and competition for university, that institution situated at the apex of Japan’s education-credential society, may at least serve in the short-term as a means of ameliorating the disorientation

currently characterizing middle and high school education.

Japan's Education-Credential Society in *Because She's Brainless*: A World of "Deviation" and Meritocracy

How are "education credentials" with respect to university education represented in literary and cultural discourse? To answer this question, I discuss Himeno Kaoruko's *Because She's Brainless* (*Kanojo wa atama ga warui kara*), winner of the 2018 Shibata Renzaburō Award.

This novel is famous for its depiction of the May 2016 "University of Tokyo obscenity incident," also known as the "University of Tokyo Birthday Research Group indecent assault incident." The "Birthday Research Group" (Tanjōbi Kenkyūkai) was formed by male University of Tokyo students for the purpose of having sex with women from other universities. On May 10, 2016, the students brought a drunken woman from a bar to a mansion in Sugamo where they repeatedly sexually assaulted her. The woman, who resisted the assaults, eventually managed to escape and report the crime to the police through a public phone. The young men's unscrupulous behavior was exposed in detail in the ensuing trial and mass media, garnering widespread public attention.

In these reports, another woman was revealed to have been present at the scene of the assault. She testified that she had asked the victim if she wanted to leave with her but that she did not respond. It was also reported that one among the perpetrators had a preexisting sexual relationship with the victim. The public disclosure of the incident thus exposed the victim to a second round of torment. With respect to the reporting and ensuing public response, Himeno stated the following in an interview: "In a situation where one woman has just witnessed another naked and being ridiculed, when the former asks, 'Do you want to leave?' I don't think the latter would simply answer, 'Sure, let's leave!' and immediately get up. . . . In this incident, which was awful for Miss A [the victim] and disgraceful for the University of Tokyo students, I think there must have been a more trivial yet complex and universal cause or reason [why she didn't get up]." She added that she decided to "write about the incident fictionally, since writing a factual account would have been petty and an invasion of privacy" (*Kanojo wa atama ga* 2019).

In the novel, then, the names of the victims and the perpetrators and their club are changed, and the scope of the incident is extended to their family relationships. The one thing Himeno leaves unchanged, however, is the name "University of Tokyo." Perhaps this can explain such charges against her that

“University of Tokyo students are reading [the novel] as a report about the University of Tokyo and are angry over its inaccuracy.” To this charge, Himeno simply replied: “If they are angry [about that], I am angry about Tsubasa [the novel’s male protagonist] and the others, the University of Tokyo students who used their outstanding ‘abilities’ to commit such an act” (“*Kanojo wa atama ga*” 2019).

The novel sparked another public outcry in 2019 when Ueno Chizuko referenced it in her congratulatory address to the matriculating University of Tokyo freshmen. This speech is famous for raising the problem of discrimination against female students based on statistics showing the number of male students matriculating to the Faculty of Medicine to be 1.2 times higher than that of female students even though the latter’s deviation score on the corresponding admission exam was higher. Reminding the audience of the obscenity incident and that the male University of Tokyo students involved actually uttered the words of the novel’s title, “because she’s brainless,” Ueno (2019) judged the novel an example of “how society views male University of Tokyo students.” Himeno’s novel is indeed unique in how well it portrays the differences between men and women in their identifying as University of Tokyo students, even contrasting their behavior on dates: Female students try to hide their affiliation with the University of Tokyo, whereas male students openly declare it and attain certain benefits.

For Ueno, who has struggled against the very durable social prejudice that is gender discrimination in Japanese society through her ability alone, the differing deviation scores between male and female students on the university admission exam offer significant evidence for reminding the audience of the baseless myth that “women are brainless.” Yet Ueno’s argument can also be seen as tacitly affirming the meritocracy of education credentials and deviation scores. The novel does not focus on the distinction between male and female University of Tokyo students but rather that between University of Tokyo and non-University of Tokyo students in terms of their differing deviation scores, and it is on this basis that events unfold. In sum, the novel is problematic in terms of its vivid portrayal of how deviation scores intended as a means of gaining university admission do not vanish with enrollment but continue to function as a means of differentiating between and discriminating against certain students.

The novel’s female and male protagonists are Kandatsu Misaki and Takeuchi Tsubasa, respectively. Their stories do not begin with their admission to university but in middle school, reflecting the author’s desire to show how early the differences between them that led to the incident emerged. I explore this

point in more detail in the following sections.

1. Universities Haunted by the Specter of “Deviation Scores”

Kandatsu Misaki is from Aoba-ku, Yokohama. Hers was originally a family of farmers, but after the construction of the Tōkyū railway line and development of the region the men in her family began to work for a fast-food delivery company and the women for a dry-cleaning business. Misaki's elementary school friend Asuka gains admission to a Japan Women's University-affiliated middle school, “taking three trains every day to go to school.” Entrusted with taking care of her younger siblings while her parents are working, however, Misaki cannot but give up on improving her social standing, repeating the word “eventually” as if chanting a mantra.

Misaki eventually enters Fujio High School, a public school in Kanagawa Prefecture that is “not the top high school in the prefecture but prestigious for Aoba-ku.” As Himeno describes, this was a “mammoth school with as many as twelve classes per grade filled with high-achieving students,” but there are those who worry that under the school's “lax rules and cheerful spirit . . . lacking a clear sense of purpose and focus in preparing for university could lead to wasted time and a lax study attitude.” Without attending any cram schools and continuing to diligently help with the housework and take care of her younger siblings, Misaki manages to qualify for the Faculty of Global Design, College of General Living, “Mizutani Women's University,”⁴ which is her third choice. Himeno reveals the high school deviation ranking of the students of this university, as estimated by a university admission exam cram school, to be “forty-eighth.”

While the deviation scores of the other universities depicted in the novel are not referenced, one can easily infer that Misaki's university admission exam scores were not all that impressive. By examining deviation rankings compiled by cram schools, one may find that Misaki's first and second choices of university—the Department of Art Studies, Faculty of Letters, Meiji Gakuin University and the Department of Journalism, School of Letters, Senshu University—were ranked fifty-fifth and fiftieth, respectively. Of course, considering that most of the other girls at Misaki's high school who end up attending women's universities mainly gain admission to Seisen University, Jissen Women's University, Kyoritsu Women's University, Osaka Shoin Women's University, or Yasuda Women's University, schools ranked between forty-second

4. One may assume that the author used this fictional name to prevent any harm to the university the actual victim attended. “Fujio High School,” referenced below, is also a fictional name.

and fifty-fifth, one could say that Misaki's university admission exam score was average for her school. Her family and relatives, who have "never viewed university from the perspective of deviation scores," simply congratulate her for getting into a school that was "founded as a sewing school in the Meiji era" and that is a "historic school that was much talked about after the war for its slogan of 'rational home economics.'"

Himeno depicts Misaki's high school as an "example of the failure of the university admission exam measures for public high schools in recent years." As described by a Kanazawa Kagamigaoka High School teacher in the story, public high schools traditionally achieved higher deviation scores than private schools in the countryside, but this changed in the 1990s as private schools began to establish "special university admission courses" that helped to raise their deviation rankings. Since the 1990s, then, just one public high school outside Tokyo has remained in the top ten ranking, with most of the rest of the spots occupied by private schools (Himeno 2021, 185-86). Experiments such as the special class featured in *Dragon Zakura* have thus already been underway in the countryside since the 1990s. In that case, Misaki's poor university admission result could at least be partly attributed to the inadequate response of public schools to this trend.

Meanwhile, Takeuchi Tsubasa and his family live in a luxury home nearby the Tokyo Hibiya railway line. It is a government-provided residence, as his father works for the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries. A native of Iwamijiwa, Hokkaido, Tsubasa's father attended Hokkaido University before attaining his government position and moving to Tokyo. He is "harassed daily by second- and third-generation graduates of the University of Tokyo like [one of the perpetrators, Miura] Jōji at the government office, close to twenty percent of the staff of which are Tokyo natives, and he [realizes] that he is [no more than] a clever country boy" (Himeno 2021, 134). More than anything, he wants to send his two boys to the University of Tokyo. Tsubasa's mother is a graduate of Tokyo Gakugei University and a former elementary school teacher. She taught for about a year before becoming a fulltime housewife. She is dedicated to her children's education, preparing and feeding them organic food. Tsubasa's older brother qualifies for the University of Tokyo's School of Law after attending prestigious private middle and high schools.⁵ Tsubasa, on the other hand, chooses to attend a public middle school, saying, "I don't want to go to a school where I have to struggle just to keep up with spoiled rich kids" (25). After

5. The private high school that Tsubasa's older brother attends in the novel is referred to as Asabu High School, a thinly veiled alias for Azabu High School.

attending a prestigious national high school, he qualifies for the Faculty of Engineering at the University of Tokyo.

Tsubasa's family environment provides a typical example of the heritability of educational credentials, where students' educational credentials are determined by the wealth and cultural capital of their parents. Of course, by no means does such heritability preclude students from lower-ranked high schools from qualifying for prestigious universities or students from prestigious high schools with high deviation values foregoing university (Tachibanaki 2010, 133). Data in this regard underpins the claim that students' individual effort is just as important as high school deviation scores for getting into university. In the novel, however, Himeno rather emphasizes differing environments over differing individual abilities. Her insistence on the relationship between the University of Tokyo and parents' wealth is intelligible in the following passages: "The University of Tokyo is brimming with spoiled rich kids. In statistics comparing the annual incomes of parents by [their children's] university, the University of Tokyo comes out overwhelmingly on top" (Himeno 2021, 139); "The University of Tokyo is by far the best university in Japan not only in terms of gathering together those with intellectual ability but also from affluent families, since students must have wealthy parents to gain admission to private schools and attend cram schools" (208). Furthermore, as if trying to substantiate this point, she describes in detail how the major members of the "Zodiac Research Group" (the fictional name of the Birthday Research Group)—Miura Jōji, Wakuta Satoru, and Kunieda Kōji—come from families belonging to the highest economic echelon.

Himeno's emphasis on the relationship between wealth and the University of Tokyo can be seen as representing a deeper point: As a means for universities to select students, the significance of education credentials as determined by differing deviation scores should gradually decrease or fade away following admission to university, but this is simply not the reality in contemporary Japanese society. Deviation scores in the novel, in other words, serve not only as a means of distinguishing the University of Tokyo perpetrators but also for differentiating between the victim Misaki, those around her, and others.

Take Misaki's high school friend Inoue Natsumi, for example. She ends up attending the Faculty of Science Division II, Tokyo University of Science, the only night university program left in Japan. When Misaki invites her to a gathering of girls from Mizutani Women's University and boys from Yokohama University of Education, she shocks the other students, who have been informed of her background by Misaki beforehand, when she acts "as if she was attending the [daily] Faculty of Science Division I, Tokyo University of Science." In this

incident, Himeno strives to show just how commonplace the differentiating of universities based on high school deviation scores has become in contemporary Japanese society. In the novel, however, not only do the Yokohama University of Education students forgive Natsumi's faux pas, one of them even comforts her when she hurts herself, and the two end up pursuing a romantic relationship. This can be seen as an example of how deviation scores might be appropriated as a means of enhancing understanding through acknowledging mutual difference rather than as mere objects of desire within a "clique culture," for improving one's social standing, or self-deprecation. Be that as it may, the Zodiac Research Group members regard deviation scores as an inexorable fact, instead of a problem to be overcome, and as a means of advancing their own superiority and making money.

Why do high school deviation scores haunt universities like a specter? The reason is the lack of a uniform method to explain the real differences in ability between university students like Misaki and Tsubasa. In other words, it is no easy task to compile a consistent dataset that might substitute for high school deviation scores to confirm the disparities between universities. As is well known, a university's "level" can be evaluated differently depending on the variables observed, such as research impact or the rates at which graduates attain employment. For that matter, such evaluations hinge on the particular aspects of research impact or the rates at which graduates attain employment in the professional areas that are their focus. Especially in a situation in which there are no universal criteria to categorically compare and evaluate students' university admission exam scores and grade point averages upon graduation, there seems little other recourse than to assess the "education credentials" of their universities based on their admission scores. While there are global university rankings, which focus on research universities, such systems are inadequate to grasp the "education credentials" of Japanese universities, which are ranked based on minute differences.

With high school deviation scores as the only option to differentiate between universities, this may explain why a great deal of Japanese literature dealing with problems in education cannot but limit itself to the disparities resulting from the university admission exam system. As in *Dragon Zakura*, for example, which presents a special class for specifically gaining admission to one university—the University of Tokyo—establishing a special class with an explicit goal based on the assumption that universities are evaluated according to uniform criteria is impractical in reality.

2. The Problem of Meritocracy

The novel's portrayal of the prevalence of deviation scores within universities can also be seen as a reflection of American-style neoliberal values that disseminated in the 2000s, through which it was emphasized that university admission based on ability alone would be the fastest route to resolving the gap between the rich and poor.

Tsubasa relies less on his parents compared to his older brother and gets into the University of Tokyo more through his own effort. As evident in his hatred of people who “deludedly conflate their parents’ money for their own ability,” a perspective which he expresses toward a classmate who decides to attend Keio Academy of New York, he denounces inherited education credentials and absolutizes individual ability. The same goes for Hiroshima native and Zodiac Research Group member Ishi Teruyuki, whose social capital is relatively insubstantial and whom the other members call “Enoki.” The second son of a public middle school principal, he achieves higher grades than his older brother, who attends a new private high school. He gains admission to the “greatly esteemed Prefectural Kasuga High School” and then the University of Tokyo, but with his family unable to afford anything beyond tuition he cannot enjoy “school life” in the manner of his peers. Forced to work parttime jobs, he incurs both the constant sympathy and ridicule of the other study group members. Yet he too expresses disdain for Keio University: “This rich idiot from Keio wastes his time on fool’s errands trying to do ‘Miss Keio’ and the only thing he gets is a bowl of soup for helping her with some asinine event. Girls will drop their panties if you just utter the name ‘University of Tokyo’” (Himeno 2021, 244). And just like Tsubasa, who is bewildered by his middle school classmate’s decision to attend the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Tōyō University because she likes Sakaguchi Ango, Teruyuki regards his older brother as “pathetic” for entering the Kochi University of Technology because he likes Sakamoto Ryōma (215). He has internalized the education-credential-centric meritocracy to the very bone.

Author of *Korea's Meritocracy* (*Han'guk ūi nŭngnyŏkchuŭi*) Pak Kwŏn-il (2021, 24) observes that, as a term connoting “rule” (*-cracy*) through “inherent ability” (merit), “meritocracy” can be translated variously but has been more or less used interchangeably with “education credentialism” since Michael Young’s study of the discriminatory nature of education systems based on IQ and effort. For example, Japanese sociologist of education Kikkawa Tōru (2009, 140) distinguishes between “meritocracy [i.e., education credentialism] in which one’s professional status is determined by educational credentials” and credentialism

“in which one’s professional status is determined by one’s qualifications.” Pak Kwön-il (2021, 24) also states, “I think that education credentialism and academic factionalism are ... ‘meritocracy’ by other names.” “Ability” is indeed an abstract concept difficult to measure by any absolute standard. Precisely for this reason, it is understandable why education credentials or deviation scores intended as objective indicators of ability but end up as its substitutes. Fukuzawa Yukichi (1942, 12) wrote in *An Encouragement of Learning (Gakumon no susume)*, which he composed in 1872 amid Japan’s transition to modernity, “Human beings are the same at birth, whether of the aristocracy or the underclasses, rich or poor. He who devotes himself to scholarship, coming to know the true nature of things, becomes noble and wealthy. He who does not learn becomes poor and base.” The Japanese people at the time recognized education credentials based in modern learning as a new form of “fairness” that could replace the unfair hereditary class system. This can be seen as an example of the belief in the proper function of education-credential focused meritocracy.

Yet there is also a negative side to education-credential-focused meritocracy, as Michael J. Sandel (2020, 36) points out, in assigning complete responsibility for success or failure in life squarely on the individual. Sandel argues that crediting or blaming only one’s “ability” for qualifying or failing to qualify for a prestigious university, overlooking the help or lack of help from one’s surrounding environment, in the form of parents, teachers, lecturers, and so forth, only promotes prejudice against and self-resignation among those with poorer education credentials, completely failing to offer a solution to worsening inequality (Sandel 2020, 159-61). His criticism of elite attitudes toward those with poor education credentials particularly resonates with Himeno’s relentless depictions of the University of Tokyo members of the Zodiac Research Group in *Because She’s Brainless*. One could choose from countless passages in this regard, but the following will suffice:

The police officers who came to arrest us were also garbage. They did not look like they had gotten any further than high school. The most garbage-like of all, however, was the pain-in-the-ass women’s university student. That stupid bitch. I don’t go around saying this out loud, but idiots who have been idiots since they were a single cell, wimps, and the sick—they’re all weaklings. The weak are to be culled. It is a principle of nature that the strong eat and the weak are eaten. Why do they try to conceal this truth? This is the truth. It’s natural. The strong take care of the weak without breaking a sweat. Looking downward? What’s wrong with that? Volunteer work, charity, welfare—these are all the gifts of looking downward, aren’t they? (Himeno 2021, 477)

In this passage, one of the Zodiac Research Group members Wakuta Satoru is expressing his feelings after his indictment is waived at the victim's request. A graduate of Kanazawa's prestigious Kagamigaoka High School and the University of Tokyo, he is now in graduate school and planning to study abroad at MIT on a scholarship from the Kaga International Education and Exchange Foundation. His dog-eat-dog worldview, which forms the basis of his hatred for "the weak," is in no way a "hidden truth" only the highly educated elite narrowly ascertain after many years of study, but something quite comprehensible even for someone poorly educated or a child. Encapsulated in the passage above is the problem of meritocracy today. Satoru's worldview does not contradict but is actually quite congruent with meritocracy. The perception that even supposedly unassailably altruistic behavior like volunteer work or charity is but a "gift" granted to the weak by the strong is shocking in its revelation of the "inner core" of elitism today.

Of course, the elite's ethical corruption is not entirely attributable to neoliberalism. Mishima Yukio's (1950) *The Age of Blue (Ao no jidai)*, for example, depicts a University of Tokyo student who commits fraud amid the chaotic aftermath of the war. And in *The Decay of the Angel (Tennin gosui)*; Mishima 1971), there is a scene in which the protagonist, University of Tokyo student Yasunaga Tōru, succumbs to narcissism and strikes his adoptive parents. As far as the degree to which University of Tokyo students' dog-eat-dog worldview is emphasized in *Because She's Brainless*, however, the prevailing milieu in which calls for meritocracy increasingly obscure anxiety over increasing employment uncertainty under globalization was likely influential. In other words, while it is true that Satoru's ability is a product of Kanazawa's cultural capital, at the same time, his anxious feeling that something is lacking ensures his inability to endure even for an instant without confirming his superiority.

To be sure, Himeno regards Satoru and the other University of Tokyo perpetrators coolly throughout the novel. This is not because none among the perpetrators acknowledged the wrongness of their actions and earnestly expressed remorse. Rather, her attitude has more to do with the public discourse that arose after the incident, on so-called internet message boards and so forth. Instead of criticizing the University of Tokyo perpetrators, public opinion tended to paint the victim Misaki as a kind of sleazy con artist attempting to squeeze some money out of University of Tokyo students. Some even went as far as to expose her private information online. Considering this reaction, it is all but natural that Himeno chose to focus her criticism on the perpetrators' prejudiced worldview and poor morals, aspects of the case overlooked by a

sympathetic public.

Throughout the novel, Himeno rules out absolutely the possibility that the incident may have been “accidental.” Miura Jōji, the founder of the Zodiac Study Group, is portrayed from the outset as intending to capitalize on the prestige of the University of Tokyo to make money and pursue sexual gratification, drawing in students from Ochanomizu University and Mizutani Women’s University. Through this perception, she depicts quite convincingly how what happens to Misaki could naturally happen to another woman at any time, something actually attested to in the trial.

To a certain extent, however, Himeno is only enraged that the University of Tokyo students “use their superior ‘ability’ for this sort of behavior,” without questioning the inner core of this “ability” as does Ueno Chizuko. This raises the question of whether the very name “University of Tokyo” is functioning to obfuscate the need to confront and reconsider the “ability” of University of Tokyo students such as Tsubasa and Jōji. In other words, Tsubasa, Jōji, and Teruyuki’s rejection of the request that they drop out of the University of Tokyo, instead opting to engage in a protracted legal battle, also signifies their refusal to prove their abilities without the shielding known as the “University of Tokyo.” This shows just how flimsy the “ability” these students so readily proclaim is. The same can be said for the public who defended and praised the University of Tokyo perpetrators. The name “University of Tokyo” functions to absolve and obscure the exhausting demand for new concrete definitions and proof of “ability” appropriate to the times not only for University of Tokyo students but for all of Japanese society.

Meanwhile, having already graduated from the University of Tokyo, Satoru and Kōji easily accept the victim’s request that they drop out of graduate school to avoid prosecution. This small price to pay to move on with their lives clearly evinces the general perception of “ability” in contemporary Japanese society: It is synonymous with university names and deviation scores. As long as this perception remains unchanged, there appears no way to ensure the perpetrators pay for their crime.

Conclusion: A World Apart from Education-Credential Deviation Scores

Himeno Kaoruko’s *Because She’s Brainless* successfully represents Japan’s education-credential society through the unacceptable perceptions regarding women of University of Tokyo male students atop the pyramid of deviation

scores. However, it also diverts attention from another important problem of Japan's educational-credential society.

According to Kikkawa Tōru, the fundamental problem of Japan's education-credential society is the "education-credential disparity," where the number of students entering university annually has not increased since the 1980s. In other words, since the 1990s in Japan the annual number of students entering university has remained at just barely 50 percent of the eligible population despite the lowering threshold for university admission due to population decline. There are "plenty of young people lacking any desire to attend university," Kikkawa (2009, 38) writes, "while there are no longer many who desire to attend university but are unable, as in the past." In this situation, "University graduates are not 'winners' in a game in which all participate, but at most participants in the education-credential game." From this perspective, the deviation-score-centered meritocracy portrayed in *Because She's Brainless* is ultimately a world limited to university students and graduates.

The "education-credential disparity" became an issue in Japan in the 2000s as calls began to consider class disparities in relation to the problem of education credentials. At this time, many social problems became perceptible by paying attention to rates of university attendance in terms of "data" demonstrating the deepening disparity in wages between university and high school graduates. The disparity in education credentials is not simply a problem of "inherited educational credentials," that is, the relationship between parents' wealth and regional differences and university admissions that has become ever-more consolidated. The declining rate of university admission since the 2000s is undoubtedly linked to growing wage disparities even between university graduates depending on their family backgrounds and particularly to the social hurdles women confront. Even as university graduates, women often end up as non-regular workers due to gaps in periods of employment for having children and so forth.

In the meantime, several highly appraised literary works have emerged to represent this "reality." Tsumura Kikuko's (2009, 2016) *The Lime Pothos Boat* (*Potosu raimu no fune*) was published in 2009 and was the recipient of the 140th Akutagawa Award. The protagonist and first-person narrator is Nagase Yukiko, who quits the job she has attained after graduating university due to the intense psychological strain inflicted upon her by her boss. After a year of unemployment, she becomes a part-time worker in a cosmetics factory in Nara, making 800 yen an hour. She is soon promoted to a contract worker making 138,000 yen (about 1,080 US dollars) per month after taxes. She continues in this position for the next four years until promoted to line department manager,

whereby her annual earnings actually decrease to 1.63 million yen (about 12,766 US dollars) due to increased income taxes. Despite her status as a university graduate, her high school deviation score or the name of her university are never mentioned in her life as a low-wage worker, nor do the English and Spanish she learned at university have any significance whatsoever. For her, work is but a means to “keep on the lights in the evening, the air conditioning in the hot summer, and the electric heater or gas stove in the cold winter.” Yet she does also succumb to despair about this life: “What’s the difference? What’s the use of sustaining a life like this?” (Tsumura 2016, 82-83). Her only dream is to save enough for a cruise trip around the world. Even so, her salary is insufficient; indeed, she cannot even afford the trip after taking an additional parttime job making 850 yen an hour at a café owned by a fellow university alumnus.

Ten years later, Imamura Natsuko’s (2019, 2020) *The Woman in the Purple Skirt* (*Murasaki no sukāto no onna*) was published and received the 161st Akutagawa Award. This novel portrays the world of an irregular female worker having nothing to do with education credentials. The narrator closely observes Hino Mayuko, who lives in her neighborhood. When not drifting from part-time job to part-time job, Mayuko roams the shopping district wearing a purple skirt. During a particularly prolonged period of unemployment, the narrator persuades her to apply for a position as a room cleaner at the hotel where she works. Mayuko attains the position, and with this the world of the hotel room cleaners emerges in earnest.

Just as with *The Lime Pothos Boat*, this is a world where a mere ten-yen difference in wages is greatly significant. The female workers dare not even dream of going back to school or engaging in the kind of labor disputes necessary to escape such low-paying work. With nothing but the hotel shampoo, towels, and champagne for comfort, it is a serious problem when one encounters difficult economic circumstances for one reason or another, as does the narrator. The narrator overcomes this individual economic crisis not through a safety net provided by the company or society but by daringly pilfering hotel items and deflecting any suspicion in this regard onto others. By offering up this resolution to the crisis faced by the protagonist, the novel risks denigrating the image of irregular women workers for the sake of entertainment. Without representing the lives of those in a world completely divorced from education credentials in the form of a black comedy, however, who in the world might be interested? In this sense, the image of Japanese society reflected in the works of these two women writers—in terms of how they depict the greater inequality hidden behind the deepening social inequality of inherited education cre-

dentials—are as worthy of careful consideration as ever. In sum, just as Japanese society is divided by education credentials, so is the Japanese cultural world divided over their representation.

This division in the representation of education credentials is not just a consequence of changes in the significance of education credentials at the conclusion of the education process but also the reinforcement of their significance due to class and gender differences. Furthermore, one must not overlook the inherent limitations of literary and cultural texts in representing Japan's contemporary education-credential society as a whole. In other words, the problem of education credentials can be excessively highlighted or marginalized due to a text's formal and semantic limitations as well as the author's disposition. It is precisely for this reason that there is a need for literary research reconstructing the whole through difference rather than generalizing about the representation of Japan's education-credential society in individual texts.

In this article, I have critically examined the prioritization of deviation scores over education credentials in *Dragon Zakura* and *Because She's Brainless*, two relatively less-explored works compared to recent award-winning literary works. Having compared the representation of education credentials in these two works with that of more recent works that have little to do with education credentials, it appears that the era in which education credentials have functioned as a social safety net in Japan has come to an end. For this very reason, however, the tendency to emphasize deviation scores is gradually becoming more pronounced. Meanwhile, neither educational attainment nor deviation scores can be of much help to irregular low-wage women workers, whose lives are getting tougher. Perhaps this is the image of Japanese society after the end of the so-called “mass-education society.”

Are there any lessons in this for Korean society, which strives to resolve inequality through any educational means available with an even more intense emphasis on education credentials than Japan? If there are, they extend beyond the mere need to strengthen the gender sensitivity of students at prestigious universities—who sit atop the education-credential pyramid—and respect and regard the ethical sensibility allowing for coexistence with others as a kind of ability. Perhaps the Japanese case rather implies the need to acknowledge that intrinsic inequality cannot be resolved through education credentials and deviation scores alone, and to encourage greater awareness and concern for the vulnerability of those who live—or cannot but live—outside the “world of education credentials.” In other words, rather than creating reasons to encourage students to attend a specific university in an age when university admission is more attainable than ever before, greater effort should be expended on con-

structuring a social safety net protecting those who have no choice but to live a life unrelated to a university education. There is a need to sincerely consider this necessity through the representation of the life of irregular workers in Japan, which has been unable to offer a vision in this regard, outside of raising wages by a few dozen yen.

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