

# Response to Professor Okuda

James C. BAXTER

*International Research Center for Japanese Studies*

Professor Okuda deserves high praise for her clear account of the history of basic approaches to higher education and the liberal arts, primarily in the twentieth century, in Japan and the United States. I might take exception—as a historian concerned with particulars and convinced of the importance of differences in details and more-or-less precise recording of those differences, and also speaking from personal experience as one educated in the United States in the 1960s—to the sense she conveys that there were well-defined phases marked by fairly sharp transitions. I do feel a compulsion to remark that her schema compresses the details and summarizes educational trends, simplifying chronology and not attempting to cover the wide diversity in pedagogical approaches that could be found, for example, in American universities in the 1960s and '70s.

I will not go on at great length about this. Let me note for the record, however, that there were and still are plenty of U.S. institutions in which pedagogy ranges from hierarchical, top-down emphasis on material delivered in lectures and uncritical absorption or memorization of readings, on the one hand, to horizontal, open-ended emphasis on give-and-take in discussions and constant critical questioning of material presented in multiple formats and media, on the other. Something like “critical thinking” was being taught in many college and university courses well before the 1960s, and it may have come to be widely accepted since the late 1960s, and it might even be characterized as the dominant trend. Yet it has many aspects and goes by different names in different places, and in the everyday discourse within as well as without the academy, very often it is not practiced or accorded special respect.

I recognize, of course, that Professor Okuda writes from the perspective of a student of rhetoric and communication. She is not a professional historian and the standards of the historical discipline are not appropriate for

evaluating her work. In a short presentation such as her essay in this volume, it is effective, and hardly unconventional or irresponsible, to simplify precisely in order to make one's major points understandable. And even a historian inclined to quibble about particulars has to acknowledge that her rendering of the main outline of the story of developments in higher educational teaching approaches is persuasive.

She is instructive about parallels and contrasts in higher education in both the prewar and postwar years in Japan and the U.S. Following in the footsteps of Takeuchi Yō, among others, as she traces the path of modern Japanese university education, or what she terms "campus norm culture" (*kyanpasu kihan bunka*), from the late nineteenth century to the present—from privileging book learning and "worship of the West" (*seiyō sūhai*) in the Meiji and early Taishō periods through Marxist materialism in the late Taishō and early Shōwa periods to ultranationalist ideology in the mid-Shōwa years and finally to privileging of professional training and devaluation of traditional liberal arts and what used to be regarded as canonical literature in the late Shōwa and Heisei periods. Reinforcing her qualitative account with statistics on attendance at post-secondary educational institutions, she reminds us that while university education was once a vehicle for producing an elite, it has been reconfigured since the 1960s as a system for providing usable "real world" skills to a majority of the Japanese people. Regarding the U.S. as well as Japan, she writes perceptively about the widespread transformation of institutions of higher learning into facilities for preparing students for careers and for lifelong learning. She gives us a succinct description of the still-prevailing paradigm in American higher education: general education in the early undergraduate years followed by more specialized coursework, with even more highly specialized professional training in graduate school.

It seems to me plain as I read her essay that Professor Okuda is an engaged scholar, not a dispassionate spectator looking down from a great height at her subject. She begins with an observation that our former Nichibunken colleague (now Nagoya University Associate Professor) Watanabe Masako has also made, namely that Japanese education has emphasized the cultivation of ability to convey emotion more than cultivation of logical faculties. Implicitly accepting that the phenomenon of globalization is

inexorable and irreversible—and appearing to go along with the assumption that Western modes of discourse and argument are standard in a globalized world—she suggests that fostering of emotional styles of expression is bad strategy for Japan today. We live, she notes, in a time when opportunities are increasing for Japanese to communicate their ideas and intentions to “others” whose cultures and ways of life and modes of thinking are different. In her view, Japanese instruction about writing and thinking should be reoriented to cultivate reasoning consonant with (globalized, but in origin Western) paradigms she sees as universal. She advocates teaching of “critical thinking” to achieve this.

Professor Okuda offers a good, readily comprehensible précis of critical thinking doctrine and practice, and her treatment of the background of critical thinking, going back to John Dewey, enhances the value of that précis. We would be wrong, however, to see critical thinking as universal, as applicable or acceptable in all societies and cultures in the twenty-first century, or, necessarily, as the most advanced stage in a progressive development of pedagogical thinking. Her nice characterization of critical thinking cannot but leave out—given the space she has here—much of the formal subtlety and complexity its proponents (for example, scholars such as Richard Paul and Robert Ennis, or the Institute for Critical Thinking at Montclair State University in New Jersey) have invested it with. Having endorsed critical thinking, she does not put it explicitly into the context of the post-9/11 world. If we begin to do that, we have to factor in issues of understanding and communicating with fundamentalist mentalities. It seems obvious that fundamentalists, whether they are Islamic or Christian or something else, have no use for the empathetic and tolerant elements of critical thinking. It seems equally obvious that in the discourses of politics (and we might take U.S. and Japanese politics as representative), advocacy and adversarial onepmanship are practiced far more often than critical thinking.

To contextualize her argument about communication and pedagogy in terms of the current clash between Islamic fundamentalism and supporters of George W. Bush’s worldview, or in terms of contemporary domestic politics in Japan and the U.S., however, Professor Okuda would have to write a different and much longer piece than the one she has given us here. For our purposes in this volume, she need not do this. Her contribution here is most

admirable. As for the prospects for success in getting along in a globalized world by teaching critical thinking, I very much hope that her optimism proves to be justified.