

Japanese student movements of the 1960s and 2010s: comparing Zenkyoto and SEALDs

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Abstract

Zenkyoto in the 1960s and SEALDs in 2015 are among the largest student-led movements that have occurred in Japan. This research paper seeks to explore the connections between both eras and to identify effective tactics for youth social and political engagement in Japan's unique post-war climate by analyzing and comparing its strategies and its circumstances. The seemingly contradictory desire of today's Japanese youth to engage in politics without activism reflects the enduring fear of radicalization and violent conflicts with police. SEALDs attempted to address these fears by pioneering digital spaces for members to connect and by making fashionable branding core to their growth. Japanese youth social movements are ultimately driven less by identity-based challenges, but rather circumstantial issues borne from the desire for democratization following World War II. As Japan pursues globalization, it will be key for youth to step out of their comfort zone for more exposure to the world.

Keywords: Student social movement, youth political engagement, SEALDs, Zenkyoto, youth

Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the United States saw an increase in social and political activism. In some ways, the pandemic brought to light systematic inequalities that were no longer tolerable for many Americans. While America was the epicenter of many movements, such as the

resurgence of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, it spread to many other countries. In Tokyo, a BLM protest was held, yet it lacked the focus and energy of its American counterparts. The lack of connection between politics and the daily lives of Japanese youth was apparent not only at that protest but also throughout the greater part of the last fifty years. In the Nippon Foundation's Awareness Survey, only 20% of Japanese youth believe they can change their country or society, whereas almost half of the youth answered as 'interested and want to engage in politics and social movements' (Tominaga, 2021). This contrast shows an interesting perception of youth's perspective of such movements. After the wave of student movements of the 1960s, activism became less visible and it became difficult for youth to consider going against the people in power in Japanese society. Nonetheless, the acknowledgment of political and social issues, and addressing them for improvement are crucial to achieving a world with more inclusivity, equality, and equity. I seek to find out the possibility of historical reasons by comparing two past student movements in Japan and to look for effective tactics for youth social and political movements by finding the answer to those two questions: How has history affected student movements in Japan? What makes a successful youth movement in Japan? I argue that contemporary youth movements in Japan have several parallels with movements from the 20th century; however, the perceived radicalization of

the earlier movements has led to discouragement and cynicism today.

Student-led social and political movements in Japan have evolved over time, often reflecting parallel movements occurring beyond its borders. The All Japan Federation of College Student Governments, *Zengakuren*, was at the forefront of student-led activism. Its ideologies reflected the dominant ideas of communism and nationalism in the early 1900s in Japan. The ideology of nationalism and communism leading to World War II raised awareness in youth. For instance, the *Study Group on Military Matters* and *National Student Union Against Military Training* were both founded in 1923 to promote two opposite ideas concerning military issues, one for pro-militarization and one for anti-militarization. Even high school students were inspired to be engaged in the student movements such as *Koto-gakko-Remmei*. Furthermore, *Gakusei Shakai Kagaku Rengo-kai* was a student federation of social science that reorganized in 1924 as the Student Group of Communist Youth (Shimbori, 1963).

The anarchy of the political and ideological orders due to the destruction of the economy led to the decreasing number of student activists after World War II. Most of the post-war activists were elites who focused on democratic reform; the majority of people were only thinking of surviving the next day.

“Thus, in this period, when the only power elite was the occupying forces which could not be criticized or attacked, and when the people consumed their whole energy in maintaining a mere existence there could not be a student movement of a political kind.” (Shimbori, 1963)

The ideology and tactics of the movement seemed to become more radical as time passed in most cases. The moderate claim for democracy and liberalism developed into a demand for socialism and communism in extreme. Those student movements in the past also show that the

ideology with a more diverse attitude holds a greater number of participants in their movements. By looking at the timeline in Figure 1, the student movement is likely to appear first in times of social emancipation such as the 1923 Tokyo earthquake, World War II, Vietnam War, and 2011 earthquake (Shimbori, 1963).

Zenkyoto and Yasudakoudoujiken

Similar to pre-war movements, national political matters stimulated the students' movements in post-war; however, post-war movements generally focused on liberal democracy and globalism. By cooperating with non-student organizations, they were involved more as citizens rather than students. At the boundary of , many visible student movements came to an end that might have led to the declining number in visible youth engagement.

After World War II in Japan, many students were asking for democratic reform at their schools and a greater say in school administration. It started as in-school issues with the students and authorities; however, students started to feel threats to their welfare because the government organized policies such as drastically increased fees, decentralization of national universities, and the “Red Purge” of 1949 (Shimbori, 1963). The All-Campus Joint Struggle, *Zenkyoto* (全学共闘会議), was a student union formed to organize the university protests that are promoting democracy and their academic freedom in the 1960s. This union eventually became an organization with 168 national, 31 municipal, and 61 private universities (Shimbori, 1963). While some *Zenkyoto* were founded by students with democratic ideology who challenged Japanese politics, some other movements focused on non-political and local issues as well. Much of *Zenkyoto's* activity in the late 1960s turned into clashes between students and police due to its radicalization.

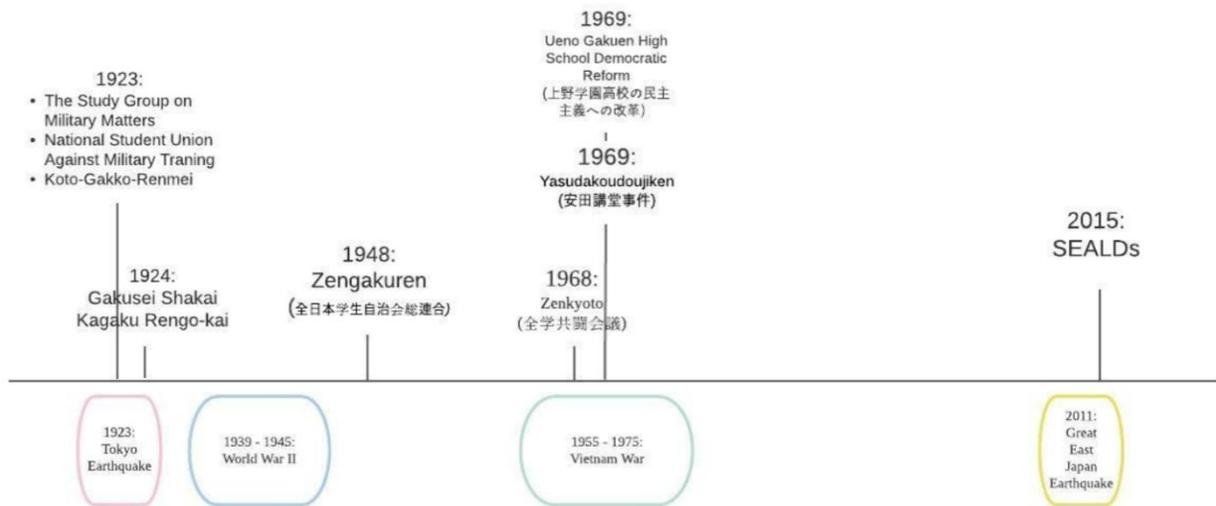


FIGURE 1: Timeline of select student movements in Japan.

TABLE 1: Answer to the question, “What do you think may be the cause of the increasingly violent and radical student activities?” Percentages represent participants that responded “Yes.” (Adapted from Fuse, 1969)

	Harsh political and economic realities in Japan	Lack of students' sense of responsibility
Students	86%	50%
Professors	82%	46%
Public school teachers	71%	57%
Parents	63%	51%

The survey, Table 1, was taken in 1967 and before the *Yasudakoudoujiken* that represents an interesting insight on students' and teachers' perspectives on the radicalization of student activism. *Asamasansoujiken* is one of the cue incidents that demonstrate the radicalism in Japanese student movements; the rising tension led to irrationalism and violence where it lost its focal point of their activism. While the majority of youth and adults agreed on blaming the

deconstructed economy after the war and on alternation in Japanese politics from communism to democracy, almost half of the youth and adults also agreed on criticizing the “students' lack of responsibility”. This could indicate that even with the understanding of difficult circumstances in politics and the economy in Japan, some believed that students should have been more responsible with their actions.

The University of Tokyo group, called *Todai Zenkyoto* (東大全共闘), started in January of 1968. Led by *Todai Zenkyoto*, *Yasudakoudoujiken* (安田講堂事件) initially started as a protest against the intern system for medical students in the University of Tokyo (Todai). Their intern system, following six years of medical education, was brutal. Graduates were forced to work for low pay as a doctor which was only 1000 dollars per month (大人の教養 TV, 2020). The medical students asked the authorities to abolish this intern system and apologize; nonetheless, the university disregarded their demand which eventually led to the occupation at the main auditorium in *Todai* from their outrage and frustration of feeling unheard and being portrayed as the ‘bad guys’. The students started to self-govern in the auditorium called *Yasuda Koudou* by teaching classes among themselves and having meetings. The authorities asked them to go back to their normal life which none of the students listened to.

Instead of proposing a compromise, they sent the riot police. Thus, 8,500 police officers were around the building ready to break in anytime (9 章 東大紛争). The students used Molotov cocktails and throwing stones to fight back the police force and argued that using police force disrupted the constitution of independent schools where they supposedly have freedom of autonomy. Throughout their occupation time, the students asked for explanations and proposed multiple terms; however, the authorities ignored them and kept on going with the police force. Eventually, students had to give up on the occupation from their mental and physical exhaustion after a year and with the cancelation of the entrance exam. Moreover, they could not succeed in making the change which resulted in the extinction of student movements from their realization of helplessness in making changes and not being heard.

Local student movements: a first-hand perspective

I was fortunate to interview Yoko Sugimura who witnessed one of the largest waves of student movements in Japan. She was a freshman high school student in 1969 when her school, Ueno Gakuen, underwent a student-led reform. Although the reform could not last due to students' dispiritedness to continue the unique style of the school system as years went by, her school also went through democratic reform by creating a new educational system and valuing 'self-learning' with their supportive teachers. Furthermore, Yoko explained that the difference between the modern social movements in America and those past student movements in Japan is that Japanese activism were not about systematic oppression regarding people's identity such as race or gender. Now looking back to those movements, she feels that it was a privilege and a nice gesture of liberalism (Y. Sugimura, personal communication, July 22, 2021).

SEALDs and Article Nine

Multiple factors contributed to the declining political engagement following *Yasudakoudoujiken*. The clashes between students, authorities, and policies in the 1960s left an unwelcoming impression on student activists (Chun, 2015). The urgency in lack of interest and engagement in politics and social activism among youth in Japan stood out when the reconstruction of Article 9 in the Japanese Constitution occurred. As the outgrowth of the Students Against Secret Protection Law (SASPL), the Student Emergency Action for Liberal Democracy (SEALDs) was founded in 2015 in Tokyo against it. SEALDs influenced many students to be more politically engaging throughout Japan including the lead for a protest against the policies of the prior Prime Minister Shinzo Abe with over 100,000 people (Chun, 2015).

Seeking to distinguish themselves from the violent image of radical political engagement in the past, SEALDs started to encourage Japanese youth to be engaged in politics and social matters. Rather than just leading with politics, they incorporated music, art, and popular culture into the activism to express inclusivity and to have 'fun' without offending others (Aonuma, 2016). By raising awareness and reminding them of the relevance of politics and their daily lives, they focused on challenging Japanese young people to explore more often in those topics. Some of their strategies took advantage of a hybrid of cyberspace and urban space to execute their brand of activism by using the networked cyberspace and physical urban spaces for self-directed education to protect Japan's liberal democratic values and promote constitutionalism. By utilizing cyberspace well, they expanded their capability throughout their activism in building on local knowledge, involving relevant stakeholders, and demonstrating connective leadership (Ute & Malcolm, etc, 2016). Those capabilities played a big role to motivate the youth around them to be more politically engaged. They were successful in creating inclusive project governance during their activity which assisted a wider variety of people to

join their organizational practices. One of the SEALDs members once described their movement in comparison to the past student movements in the 1960s and 1970s, he said:

“...we think that social movements before us seemed unapproachable, scary, and uncool for young people. I don't mean to totally disregard all the old social movements that have happened before us, and I know that there have been people who did something meaningful and fought for their causes. However, they were a bit hard for us to identify with, so we are trying to get rid of that scary image. I think it's an important factor to be fashionable and to use music in order to attract our generation so that we raise our voice.” (O'Day, 2015)

The purpose of their movements was to expand the horizon of their view on political and social matters with inclusivity by embracing new tactics in cyberspace and advocating the sense of normality in the political youth involvement. They brought their attention to the violent and 'uncool' image of the students' movements due to the rising intensity and irrationalism in the 1960s. Hence, their main focus was a modification in the image of social and political engagement to attract youth indifferent to the activism.

While SEALDs came to an end after about a year, it became a turning point for Japanese youth to realize the relevance of politics in their daily lives which was an advancement. Moreover, they made a significant impact on refreshing the image of violent and radical student movements to a peaceful and inclusive organization to achieve a better future.

Overall, they succeeded in breaking the norms and challenging the apathetic image of Japanese youth politics and speaking up to protect Japan's liberal democratic values. Their demonstration of non-violent tactics presented a rational image in the engagement of youth in politics to the public by projecting the pertinence of their freedom and life choices in their future (Falch and Hammond,

2020). By questioning ethical development in recent years and asking how to improve their ways of living, they encouraged Japanese youth to raise awareness in the lack of exploration of social and political matters. Moreover, their ability to mobilize a large number of youths by taking advantage of cyberspace led them to become one of the first large organizations in the 21st century in Japan.

Similarities and differences of Zenkyoto and SEALDs

Zenkyoto and SEALDs challenged Japanese youth to spread the sense of normalization in political and social engagement by applying different tactics according to their eras. They both valued autonomy and self-governance. The act of maintaining self-governance is important for the success of sustainable social movements (Ute & Malcolm, etc, 2016). For instance, due to the outside force of police coming in during their movements, *Todai-Zenkyoto* had an even stronger aspiration for self-governing which led to the meetings, lectures, etc at *Yasudakoudo's* occupation. This goes similarly for SEALDs as well where they had a certain structure within their community for self-governance. They created their way to sustain their movement with their 'do it yourself' spirit (Falch and Hammond, 2020). Moreover, the high school Yoko went to, Ueno Gakuen High school, demonstrated self-governance through their democratic reform initiated by students. Despite the time being uncommon of having the support from adults, their teachers decided to support students' idea of reform within themselves. They acted as leaders to encourage students to have more autonomy and independent studies for them to have more freedom in their academic careers.

To achieve the goal, both activisms were maximizing the utilization of space according to their eras. For instance, it brought much attention to *Zenkyoto's* movements when the occupation of *Yasudakoudoujiken* happened in 1969 at the University of Tokyo. Forty-six years later, SEALDs was able to utilize not just the physical space, but

cyberspace as well by using social media or creating a website for easy access for more participants. Social media were used to appraise the news of politics and social issues and spread the idea of normality of getting in touch with politics for younger people. Their website made their mission, statement, and activism clear and informed their point of view on politics as well, such as regarding the issue of Article 9 (Falch and Hammond, 2020).

One of the interesting things that both Zenkyoto and SEALDs have mentioned in some articles was that they enjoyed being with their friends and hanging out together. One of the former Zenkyoto members once said they were bringing alcohol and snacks inside of a blockade to drink together to just have fun and that they were not totally isolating themselves from the outside world. Seemingly, many of them were just looking for these gatherings with their peers (Miyazaki, 2001). Similar to Zenkyoto, one of the SEALDs' members also once mentioned having fun with their peers:

“It was fun and, particularly with the music and everything else, it also felt cool,” Suzuki says. “When I first started going I was particularly impressed by the speeches. I felt like I was learning things that filled a gap in my education. We’d dress for the protests wearing the same as if we were going into Shibuya with friends. It’s just the same as going out to have fun — it really feels as if it’s something connected to our everyday life.”(Sunda, 2015)

Though they were passionate about bringing changes to their community with seriousness, they also seemed to enjoy their time together to achieve the goal they created. Enjoying each others' company and having fun helped establish a sense of camaraderie.

Identity and its role in social movements

When Yoko mentioned at the end of the interview, she explained the idea of privilege comes into play when she thinks about the difference in student

movements in Japan and the United States. Although Zenkyoto movements were focused on school democratic reform, it can also be said as improving their school life; wherein contrast, many political movements in the United States ties into identity discrimination and equal human rights such as Black Lives Matter. Moreover, the initial intention of forming SEALDs was focused on political matters (issue of Article 9), yet is not directly tied to identity discrimination. Not just with the fact that most of the leaders of those movements were elites; even so, due to those privileged circumstances, some may argue those student movements were “rich kids playing at politics” (O’Day, 2015). Being able to speak up for their improvement in their school life can be seen as a gesture of liberalism in Japan. Their goals and circumstances can impact their passion and momentum in those movements.

One of the SEALDs members mentioned their graduation and passing the torch for the interview of The Japan Times in 2015 as part of the SEALDs' ending (Shibata, 2015). Though they explained that SEALDs was an ‘emergency’ organization for protesting against the abolishment of Article 9, it can also be described as a privileged gesture of being able to decide the time to put a pause to their movement. As opposed to those Japanese student movements, the ethical identity-based movements cannot and should not have a moment for a pause until there is justice for those who have been discriminated against due to their identities.

Conclusion

Perhaps the difference in focus led to the differentiation of students' social and political engagement. Compared to the United States, Japan is a relatively ethnically homogenous country; as such, most people rarely encounter identity-based discrimination on daily basis, which can make it difficult to raise awareness. Nonetheless, as globalization expands in Japan, ignorance can cause identity discrimination. Accordingly, it will be important to have more

exposure to a variety of social and political news and issues to be aware of in those subjects.

“I often remind young people that our country is not democratic, our country is authoritarian,” Gonoï says. “So we have to utilize this ‘boomerang effect’ because the Japanese media including the likes of NHK and the Asahi Shimbun, shirk under the influence of the government, which is why they don’t report on these protests directly. After an article (on youth activism) is published internationally, the ‘boomerang effect’ brings it back to the attention of media in Japan.” (Sunda, 2015)

The politically apathetic image of Japanese youth could be influenced by systematic limitations from government and education. Therefore, to shift their image and pursue globalization in the future; as young adults in Japan, they will have to be the ones to take a step out of their comfort zone to initiate the move of exploring those topics.

For the future

Whether it was a coincidence or not, it is interesting to point out that just by looking at the timeline, youth seem to stand up following a tragedy. In the case of Zenkyoto, the anti-Vietnam War was one of their common grounds for their unity. With SEALDs, they were initially formed due to the issue of Article nine in the Japanese Constitution. This could indicate the rise of student movements as Japan emerges from this global pandemic. In a way of a continuance of SEALDs activism, demonstrating the relevance of politics in youth’s daily lives should be the first step to increase youth engagement in politics, which can result in more voters and conversations about social issues as well. Moreover, having their own space for self-governance for further improvements with creating a structured community and valuing inclusivity, and finding a larger scale of common ground in activism will be important aspects to gain more participants in sustainable activism in Japan.

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