



Stress, tenure, *setsumei-sekinin*

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In recent years, university faculty members and researchers have often been heard mentioning the three words in the above title. "Stress" can be translated into Japanese as "*Ouryoku*" in the field of physics, but this loanword has taken deep root in the general public as if it were a Japanese word without any corresponding translation. "Tenure," which means "qualification of lifelong employment granted to teachers at universities and other institutions," has become such a commonly-used word in Japanese universities and research institutions that its translation is almost unnecessary there. Meanwhile, "*Setsumei-sekinin*" is a recently-coined Japanese phrase taken from "accountability" in English. More than a decade ago, I wrote an article titled "*Daigaku-ni Okeru Akauntabiriti*" (Accountability in Universities) for a research journal published by the Board of Audit of Japan. At that time, though I searched closely, the Japanese phrase "*Setsumei-sekinin*" had not yet been coined, and so I ended up using the phonetic word "*Akauntabiriti*" written in katakana. In an era of dramatic social change, new concepts are created or imported one after another. In most cases, however, no existing Japanese words fit such new concepts adequately. Therefore, katakana words are used at first, and then the phonetic words seem to follow one of the following courses: (1) to be gradually integrated into the Japanese language; or (2) to be replaced by a new translation.

The word "tenure" is generally used in American universities where it normally does not mean lifetime employment but refers to a system to guarantee the status of professors who have demonstrated certain levels of abilities and accomplishments. The ultimate goal of this system is to ensure academic freedom. Recently, an assistant professor who had been denied tenure at the University of Alabama opened fire on campus. Although this is an extreme case, the competition for tenure has been traditionally severe and highly stressful among assistant professors. When I was an assistant professor at the University of California, quite a few of my colleagues could not obtain tenure and left the university. Such situations made me anxious about my future. Fortunately, I was able to become an associate professor with tenure

on the strength of my research grant and achievements.

In Japanese universities, tenure used to be granted even to assistants, and salaries used to be raised by one gradation every year. Such generous conditions must have been seen as a heavenly world in the eye of American faculty members. However, these conditions have substantially changed over the past 20 years or so, and it has become especially difficult for young researchers to secure their tenured positions under a retirement age system. As a result, the number of postdoctoral fellows has been increasing, so has their stress level. Some people argue that Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology has the *Setsumei-sekinin* (accountability) for these consequences because the ministry itself formulated the plan to increase the number of doctors of philosophy (Ph.D.) with no future vision. Yet, the postdoctoral problem has resulted from the exercise of each individual's right to freedom of choice in his or her career, and, in this sense, it can be said to be a matter of personal responsibility. Japanese people tend to think that bureaucrats should take on this responsibility to the end in many aspects, and that is why many people seem to consider that it is the government's responsibility to prepare tenured positions under a retirement age system for postdoctoral fellows the number of which has increased due to government policies. This logic may be acceptable in a socialist country under a planned economy, but it is unacceptable in a liberal society. On the contrary, one might be correct in thinking that there have been some unusually smart government officials who deliberately raised the stress levels among young researchers so that their research efficiency could be enhanced. Is the Japanese government really so clever? Or, did it implement its plan to increase Ph.D. without a future vision? Which is the truth? In either case, what is certain is that we feel life has become more difficult as Japanese society approaches the global standard.

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