<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>The SEALDs: an indifferent image of youth in Japanese politics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>Chun, Wai Pang Stephen (秦惠鵬)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citation</td>
<td>Chun, W. P. S. (2015). The SEALDs: An indifferent image of youth in Japanese politics (Outstanding Academic Papers by Students (OAPS)). Retrieved from City University of Hong Kong, CityU Institutional Repository.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issue Date</td>
<td>2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>URL</td>
<td><a href="http://hdl.handle.net/2031/8299">http://hdl.handle.net/2031/8299</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rights</td>
<td>This work is protected by copyright. Reproduction or distribution of the work in any format is prohibited without written permission of the copyright owner. Access is unrestricted.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The SEALDs: An indifferent image of youth in Japanese politics

Chun Wai Pang Stephen

Abstract

Young people in Japan are expected to be apathetic in political participation. However, mass demonstrations against the legislation of the collective security bill in 2015 projected an indifferent image of youth in Japanese politics. Large amounts of Japanese young people actively participated in the demonstrations through a youth political organization known as Students Emergency Action for Liberal Democracy (SEALDs). Their stunning protest styles and coordination skills have become the spotlight of social media and news, drawing worldwide discussions on Japanese youth politics. Under wide range of comments and debates, the emergence of SEALDs with active participation of young people seems to challenge the politically apathetic image of youth in Japan and also recalling our memories of the student movements in the 1960s and 1970s. Therefore, this essay will explore the implications of SEALDs to youth politics in Japan through observations, and then compare it to student movements in the 1960s and 1970s. It aims to prove that Japanese youth are not politically apathetic in nowadays.

Introduction

Since July 2015, mass demonstrations in Japanese society have been triggered by Abe’s administration’s legislation of the collective security bill. Many scholars and activists gathered in the street of Tokyo to oppose the reinterpretation of Article 9 and defend the value of pacifism in Japan. Yet, within the whirlpool of antimilitarist and anti-war sentiments in Japanese society, it is also interesting to see that young people had the largest involvement in this issue through a youth political organization known as Students Emergency Action for Liberal Democracy (SEALDs). Large amounts of Japanese young people actively participated in recent demonstrations as if challenging the politically apathetic image of youth in Japan and recalling our memories of the student movements in the 1960s and 1970s. It seems that the emergence of SEALDs wants us to rethink the relationship of youth and politics in Japan today. Therefore, this essay will firstly address the general perception of young people in Japanese politics, explore the implications of SEALDs to youth politics in Japan through observations, and then compare it to student movements in the 1960s and 1970s.
The apathetic image of Japanese youth in political participation

In general, Japanese youth are expected to be apathetic and lack interest in political participation. Such phenomenon is globally witnessed as a research conducted by Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 2011 indicated that Japan shows the second large percentage point difference in voting rates between people aged 55 years old and youth under 35 years old among 29 countries (OECD 2011). On a domestic level, government institutions also pointed out that people around 20–24 years old had the lowest participation rates in 2012 lower house election (MIC 2013). If we trace the reasons behind this, most of the young people mentioned that ‘They don’t care’ or ‘They don’t have an interest in politics’ about politics (Ichimura 2012: 71). Thus, the rise of SEALDs in the recent protests really projected a very different image of young people in Japanese politics. Their style of chanting for anti-war and antimilitarist sentiments even as if reignited the public memories on the student movements took place in the 1960s and 1970s fighting for pacifist value and democracy consolidation. Many researches and comments in the Newspaper also studied the case of SEALDs by tracing back to the original student political organization called ‘Zengakuren’. Therefore, in order to find out the implications of SEALDs to today’s Japanese youth politics, the following part will compare the fundamental elements of SEALDs with the Zengakuren performed in anti-war movement from the 1960s to the 1970s.

The review of anti-war movement from the 1960s to the 1970s

Zengakuren was originally founded in 1948 under the supervision of leftist political party Japan Communist Party (JCP). It was the main political organization created by university students to promote democracy and the norm of pacifism in Japan under the U.S occupation. However, after independence, it started to form a new Leftist cohort and take the lead on anti-war social movements under the influence of intensifying conflicts among the superpowers. The most notable events coordinated by Zengakuren were known as the long decade of Ampo (U.S Japan Joint Security Treaty) protests from the 1960s to the 1970s. This long-term struggle began from the organization successfully staged a massive protest by allying with JCP and other grass roots groups to stop the revision of the security treaty under the coercive decision making of Kishi government in 1960 (Steinhoff 2008: 64). Afterward, when the U.S began to bomb North Vietnam in 1965, anti-war sentiment reached the climax in Japanese society. The organization subsequently mobilized aggressive protests in
1967 and 1970 as Prime Minister Sato Eisaku decided to visit Saigon and accept the invitation from United States to revise the security treaty which exposed Japan to the risk of involvement in the Vietnam War (Marotti 2009: 102). The whole process of the movement was resulted in violent and bloody actions of student and youth members armed with timber and rocks fighting against the riot police. Ever since the protests at the beginning of 1970s, students and Zengakuren experienced drastic setback due to their radical behaviors invoking the tight controls from the government.

Through the review of anti-war movements from 1960s to 1970s, it is possible to see young people in SEALDs has inherited certain characteristics of students in Zengakuren in which antimilitarism and the idea of democracy are sources to motivate students to participate in social movement and politics. These similarities can found in the statement of SEALDs official website which emphasizes their aims to restore democracy in Japan and uphold the value of pacifist constitution (SEALDs 2015). Nonetheless, it is inevitable to indicate that the performance of SEALDs in recent movement against the collective security bill shows a new way of young people to participate in or understand about politics in Japan. It has significant differences when compared to the Zengakuren in terms of its foundation, values and methods on organizing political movement.

The implication of SEALDs through comparison to Zengakuren

One of the most significant characteristics can be found in SEALDs is that the organization was formed independently and sustained by individuals without any political affiliation. Its foundation was originally created by several university students performed in the protest against the State Secrecy Act in 2014 (Tamura and Tominaga 2015: 1). Referring to the recent protest, the members of SEALDs are no longer limited to university students but also able to include a wider range of youth participants. The whole organization is now sustained by the voluntary participation of individuals and the reasons for Japanese youth to contribute their support are more personalized (Slater & Kindstrand & O’Day & Uno & Takano 2015). Such significant feature was also mentioned in an in-depth research done by Tamura and Tominaga (2015: 5). Many students and young people involved in the SEALDs asserted that the actions were decided based on their own individual preference and their political stances were representing themselves but not associated to any organizations or political parties. This also subsequently shows that a sense of collectiveness in the recent movement was generated by the commonalities in the convictions of young people rather than their identities and social statues. In this case, such a feature of
SEALDs is very different from the Zengakuren in the 1960s and 1970s which was highly politicalized with the supervision of JCP and the alliance with other labor unions. The foundation of Zengakuren was also exclusive and isolated where university students served as the core members upholding the organization, and the outsiders were only considered as alliance. The collective identity of being a university student, a special agent in the society was the main source and power for Zengakuren to mobilize the supports from students en masse and other minority groups (Aspinall & Weiss 2012: 286).

Other than this characteristic, it is also notable that there is no adherence to the use of ideologies in the convictions and values promoted by SEALDs. Their focus is more contemporary and pragmatic in the way that the members of SEALDs attempt to explore a broader notion of politics by decoding the political and social issues such as social welfare, life security, and national security mentioned in daily news, creating the awareness of how politics related to daily life and young people in nowadays (Slater & Kindstrand & O’Day & Uno & Takano 2015). They also differentiate their ideas from traditional politics and past student movements which have lack of sophistication, through the emphasis on straightforward way to understand politics. For example, in order to attract more young people to participate in recent protests, the SEALDs members made a six minute video to provide the easiest way for young people to understand the problems of the collective security bill legislation (SEALDs 2015). Moreover, throughout the movement, they also labeled the incumbent Prime Minster Abe Shinzo as ‘Fascist’ to let the participants who were not familiar with politics to find out the target easily regardless of the meaning of Fascism (Kingston 2015). This endeavor of SEALDs to find a new way for young people to participate in politics was largely different to the students in Zengakuren. They adopted Marxism and other communist ideologies to appeal to different minority groups and young people in Japan when the conservative government deliberately supported the business interests at the expense of people’s health and welfare to generate economic development (Steinhoff 2012).

Given the characteristics of the foundation and values, the general methods of students and young people in SEALDs on organizing the political movement are different to Zengakuren. Ever since the anti-war movements in the 1970s, student activists in Japan lost their reputation in public and experienced setback due to the misconduct in their irrational violent tactics disturbing the social order (Steinhoff 2012: 72). The peaceful demonstration performed by SEALDs in the recent protests can be seen as their way to project a rational image of young people in political
engagement. Instead of violence and aggressive techniques, the way of SEALDs in recent protests was more stylish through chanting, music performance and using some catchy slogans to draw public awareness (Slater & Kindstrand & O’Day & Uno & Takano 2015). At the same time, social media and the internet are the main tools for them to organize protests and recruit new members among young people who concerned about the issues of Japanese democracy and the revision of constitution. Yet, despite the important of information technology, they also encourage people to engage in politics through sensational experiences via direct participation in political movement. As one of the founders mentioned, it is more important to engage the five senses of young people rather than using social media (Slater & Kindstrand & O’Day & Uno & Takano 2015). This eventually created a sense of unity for the participants, generating cohesiveness of the movement. It is conceivable that such a strategy would able to strike the balance between virtual and real engagement fostered the success of SEALDs to organize demonstrations against the collective security bill with a large amount of supporters.

Politics is more about the life-style of Japanese youth

After the comparison with the Zengakuren of anti-war movements in the 1960s and 1970s, the characteristics of SEALDs in terms of its foundation, values and methods on political organization shows a very different image of Japanese young people in politics. It is possible to see that young people in Japan are not politically apathetic, but rather active in conceptualizing a broader notion of politics with different way of engagement on politics. The values of SEALDs also tell that they carry critical views towards the government, rejecting the traditional abstract ideas of politics which only emphasizes voting, national interests and power struggles. In this case, such a different paradigm of politics can be subjected to the ideas of ‘life politics’ suggested by Antony Giddens (1991). I found that there are three definitions in life politics that are relevant to the politics understood by today’s Japanese young people through the studies of SEALDs. First, according to Antony Giddens (1991: 215), political decisions are more connected with freedom of choice and lifestyle. The notions of politics in the eyes of Japanese young people in SEALDs are more about the connections with their own personal life than national interests or ideologies. The voluntary participation in recent demonstrations were largely motivated by the considerations of their identity and lifestyle in future as the coercive legislation of the collective defense security bill may increase military participation of young people and damage their patterns of life style in a democratic Japan with pacifist status. This can be seen from many participants from SEALDs saying that “I won’t kill
anyone” and emphasizing that the absence of war as a choice of citizens (Slater & Kindstrand & O’Day & Uno & Takano 2015). Second, with such consideration of politics in their life, young people in SEALDs strongly insisted their own ideas, rejecting the traditional politics and successfully finding a different way of political participation through the internet and protests to negotiate their freedom under the coercive rule of government. This can be possibly explained by the self-actualization in life-politics in which Japanese young people of SEALDs emphasized the expression of ‘I’ with strong beliefs to alter the political agenda (Farthing 2010: 188). Lastly, life-politics will develop the ethics considering ‘how should we live?’. This concept also gives some insights on the SEALDs aiming to wake up the awareness of Japanese young people in politics by explaining how political issues connected with their daily life. It raises concerns that the lives of young people in Japan are important for connecting with politics and that new strategies are required for the social context to include young people with broader understanding of politics and different ways of political participation.

Conclusion

To conclude, the presence of SEALDs has presented a different image of young people in Japanese politics, rejecting the general perception that young people in Japan are politically apathetic. At the same time, through the comparison with Zengakuren performed in anti-war movement from the 1960s to 1970s, SEALDs rather shows that today’s Japanese young people has broader notions about the idea of politics and have a very different way of political participation. Such different forms of politics interpreted by Japanese young people are similar to the ideas of life-politics which emphasizes the connection of politics with lifestyle and freedom of choice. The apathetic behaviors of young people are only toward the ‘politics’ in traditional system but not the politics in general with an alternative way of political participation. Thus, it is impossible to measure the political awareness of young people in Japan by just looking at their involvement in traditional system. To confine a mutual understanding of politics between the government and young people is the only way to reflect the real image of youth politics in Japan.
References


