Fig. 1: A student and a principal discuss the Panopticon in reference to changing school rules (Wakaki 2: 115).

The Panopticon of Japanese Collectivism in *The Screw People*

Jackson Choi

Social control has long been a popular subject of cultural studies, but among Japanese sociologists and cultural theorists, the topic has held an especially central importance. Compared to societies such as England, France, or the United States, where social values place significant emphasis on individualism and individual human rights, how do cultural theorists explain Japanese society's behaviours around rule-following, internalized hierarchy, or self-regulation? Many well-known theories explaining Japan's relationship to social conformity have been proposed, with some—such as anthropologist Chie Nakane's characterization of Japan as a hierarchical "vertical society" compared to Western culture's "horizontal society"—being notably influential among the Japanese public (Jensen 60). Yet, at the same time, Western writing has also influenced Japanese thought, with theoretical frameworks such as those of Michel Foucault and Louis Althusser used by Japanese writers to analyze Japanese society. In the process, these theories are not simply applied uncritically; rather, they are reinterpreted through the lens of local culture. Of such analyses, Tamiki Wakaki's 2015 comic, *The Screw People* (Japanese title: *Neji no Hitobito*), serves as perhaps one of the most unique reinterpretations. Its two-chapter story arc "Panopticon" explores the role of social control in the creation of both conformity *and* collective unity, which presents a collectivist counter-perspective to the more negative associations of social conformity common in Western theories.

An Overview of *The Screw People*

Fig. 2: The main character, Yamato Neji discovers a screw has sprouted from his head (1: 12).

To understand *The Screw People*'s "Panopticon," the story needs contextualization within the series as a whole. As a brief synopsis, I would describe *The Screw People* as an introspective, experimental, semi-educational, and metafictional story, themed around the topic of Western philosophy. The series' narrative centres on a high school student named Yamato Neji, who cannot help but dwell in his own head over his sense of existential unease, which then leads him to sprout a giant 'screw' (a nut and bolt) from his head (see fig. 2). As another screw-sprouting character soon explains to him, he has become a 'screwman being' (*neji ningen*) or 'screw person' (*neji no hito*)—a contemplative, questioning individual seeking answers to life's questions. As a result, over the course of the series' twenty-five chapters, Neji's desire for answers pushes him to engage with other 'screw people,' gradually developing friendships as he discusses and debates various philosophical subjects such as existentialism, art, and society.

In the series' exploration of philosophy, the narrative generally takes a very direct approach to these philosophical themes, with characters explicitly referring to philosophers, summarizing theories by name, or even outright breaking the fourth wall and

discussing concepts with a fictionalized version of the author himself (see fig. 3). Drawing on the narrative style of the edutainment genre, a typical chapter first introduces some fantastical or mundane issue (e.g., a character is invisible), and a character will then relate this to an explanation of a philosopher or philosophical concept (e.g., Immanuel Kant's *Antimony of Pure Reason*). Other characters will then discuss, debate, and ask questions in a form similar to a Socratic dialogue, with the ultimate resolution of the story coming down to a character making a personal decision about how to move on in light of the conversation.

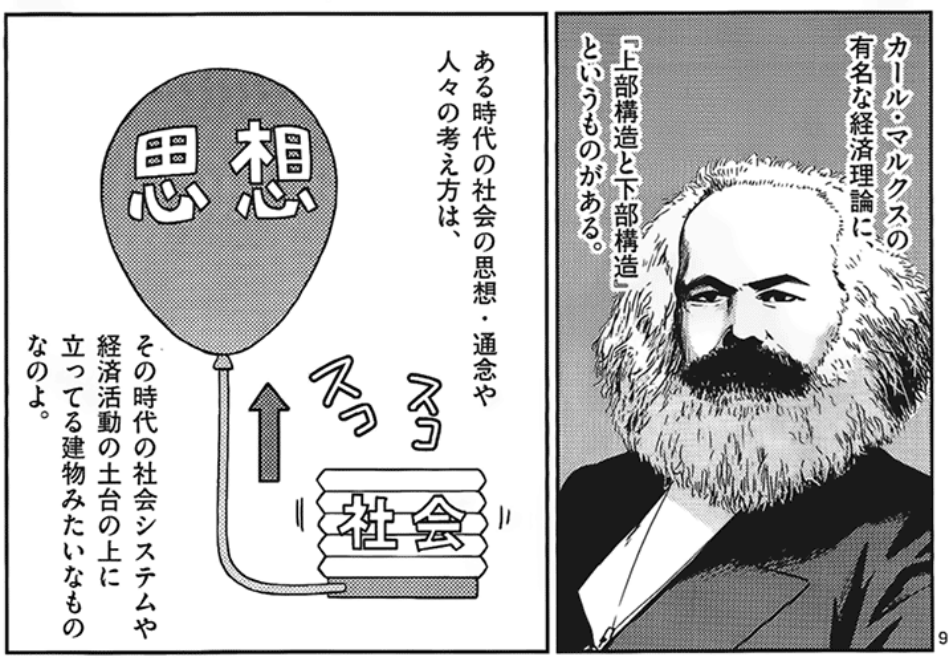

Fig. 3: An explanation of Karl Marx's concept of the Base and Superstructure (3: 129).

A key aspect of *The Screw People* is that these presentations of philosophical concepts are rarely ever straightforward retellings. Instead, the philosophical subject of any given theory is typically applied as a lens for a traditionally unrelated subject. For instance, in the story arc, "Slave Morality," Wakaki relates internet culture's tendency for vitriolic commentary to Nietzsche's interpretation of psychological 'ressentiment' and his

Christianity-critiquing concept of 'slave morality' as a need to redefine oneself as superior. In another story arc, "Neji's Academic Advising," Neji quits his role as main character, and in an attempt to convince him to return, his friend Mako brings up the subject of why we work. From there, she introduces sociologist Max Weber's notion of loneliness as a basis for modern society's relationship to work—but in describing her own Japanese society, reinterprets Weber's theories without the aspects of Christianity present in his original formulation of "the Protestant Work Ethic."

As a final point of consideration, it is useful to frame *The Screw People*'s "Panopticon" story arc in relation to broader Japanese societal norms around conformity, and in particular, its directly preceding story arc, "The Majority Rule of the Air" (*kuuki no tasuuketsu*). In general, Japanese society is commonly described as being more collectivist and conformist than Western cultures (Hamamura 3), with idioms like "the nail that sticks out gets hammered down" (*deru kugi wa utarareru*) often used to illustrate Japan's strict relationship towards conformity and rejection of individuality (Hashi). Yet, the mentality around conformity within Japan is not always seen in such a negative manner. For example, in "The Majority Rule of the Air," the central dilemma of the story is that Neji's younger sister has been outvoted by her class over what song her class will sing at the school festival. As a result, despite her strong personal desire for a different song, she is faced with an ostensibly fair system of majority rule, and so she grapples with her obligation to concede to the will of greater society versus her individual desire. This dilemma illustrates one of the important dimensions of conformity in Japan—whereas Western notions of conformity tend to associate it with unthinking obedience, Japanese society often associates it with the discarding of ego and consideration for others.

Summarizing *The Screw People*'s "Panopticon"

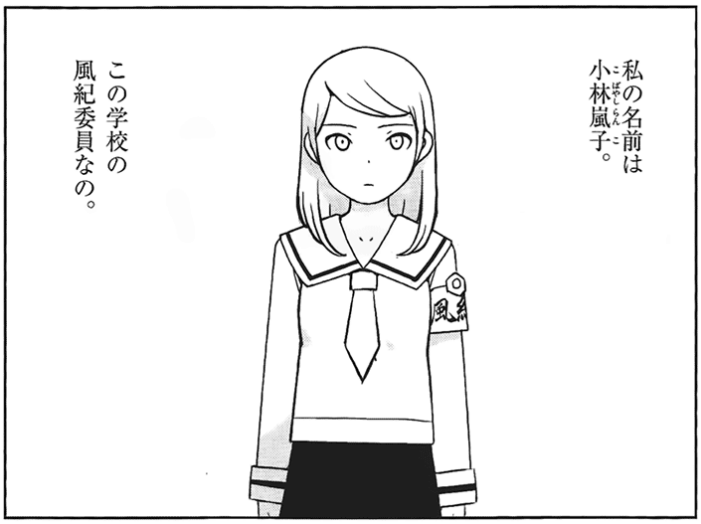

Fig. 4: Ranko Kobayashi (2: 87).

The thirteenth and fourteenth chapters of *The Screw People*, entitled "Panopticon Act 1" (*Panoputikon jou*) and "Panopticon Act 2" (*Panoputikon ge*), centre on a new 'screw person' named Ranko Kobayashi. Introduced as an unrelated student at the same high school, from the beginning she is marked as different from other 'screw people.' Physically, her screw sprouts from her upper forearm instead of her head (see fig. 4), and philosophically, her views do not necessarily challenge conventional norms. In her own words, she is someone with a strong sense of justice: valuing common virtues such as "doing things properly" (*chanto shimashou*), "not bothering people around you" (*mawari no hito ni meiwaku wa kakenaide imashou*), and "fighting the strong and helping the weak" (*tsuyoki o kujiki yowaki o tasuke*) (Wakaki 2: 84). However, despite these commonplace ideals, Kobayashi starts the story fully demoralized by her society. Watching the news, she reflects that people are always turning a blind eye to social problems out of apathy and a philosophy of "not rocking the boat" (*koto nakare shugi*) (2: 84). Even her smallest attempts to improve the world—

telling a classmate to not litter—are rebuffed, with said classmate arguing back that it does not matter since there are paid cleaners who will pick it up anyway.

In other words, what makes Kobayashi a 'screw person' (a contemplative, questioning individual) is that she earnestly thinks about society, albeit in support of conventional social values. She wishes that her society cared more about these ideals, and that Japan's prescribed social norms (such as not throwing garbage onto the subway tracks) were more strongly adhered to. This desire puts her in a unique position at school, as due to a lack of volunteers, she is subsequently randomly assigned the role of "disciplinary committee member" (*fuuki iin*). This role, sometimes translated as the "public morals committee member," is a fairly common practice in Japanese schools, where, similar to the Anglo-American roles of "hall monitor' or "school prefect," she is tasked with "assist[ing] teachers in ensuring that all pupils comply with school norms" (Sugimoto 144). Along with her mandated duties of locking the school gate at 8:25 and recording the names of late students, now when she reminds her peers not to litter, the other students actually listen to her. Yet, despite this increase in nominal authority, Kobayashi remains impassive about her role. As a result of her position, people frequently fear, blame, or argue with her, and worse still, while she is perceived as having power, in reality she finds she holds none. As a disciplinary committee member, her personal feelings towards the school rules are irrelevant and she has no control over deciding the rules, yet she is duty-bound to enforce them.

This situation changes when a new principal arrives at the school and begins to issue new school policies. Specifically, she mandates one change: that Kobayashi greet each student with an enthusiastic, "Good Morning!" when they arrive at school. This

embarrasses Kobayashi at first, but after a month, she finds that this greeting has somehow radically changed the school. As if by magic, students have become visibly more positive, engaged, and motivated, with banners congratulating their school baseball team hanging over the school and the school's non-senior students preparing to perform a school spirit-filled dance at their seniors' graduation send-off. Kobayashi and the school have embraced this greeting, and with it, seemingly transformed the school into the image of an ideal school.

Ideological State Apparatuses

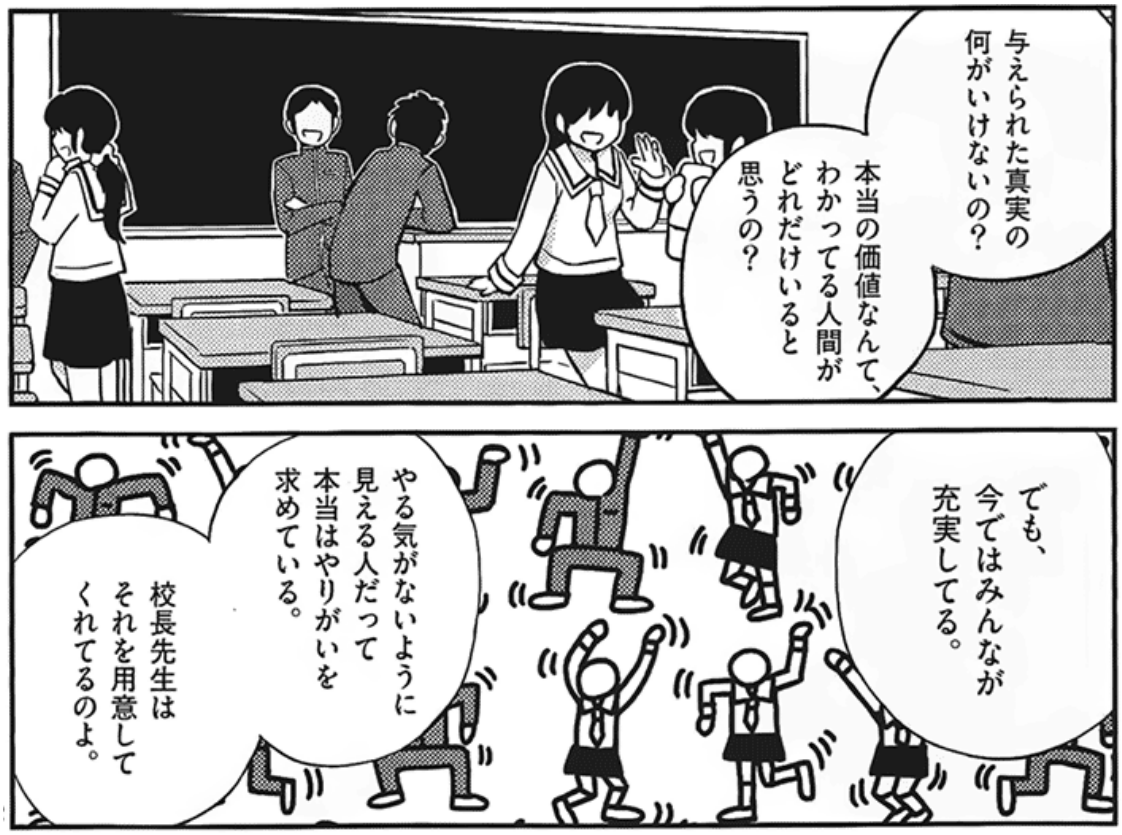

Fig. 5: The new and improved school environment (2: 112).

From the lens of Louis Althusser, this sudden transformation of 'school spirit' is the result of the educational ideological state apparatus successfully moulding the students' into replicating the ideology of those in power—namely, the principal. This is because, as

Althusser argues, schools do not just teach science and mathematics, they teach "the 'rules' of good behaviour, ... the attitude that should be observed by every agent in the division of labour" (1287). The students' changed behaviour—smiling, cheerfully greeting each other, and encouraging each other to be ambitious—is wildly taken by both faculty and students as evidence their school has become a 'good school.' However, at the same time, Wakaki illustrates a quiet unease to this unified, collective social behaviour. As the students internalize these norms and ideals through this school Ideological State Apparatus, they visually transform, losing definition and becoming little more than sketchy, cheerful doodles in a sea of dancing students (see fig. 5).

Fig. 6: Mako says that "This school has been uncomfortable lately" and that "It's creepy how weird and positive everyone is" (2: 107).

For Mako, a fiercely independent screw person, this is a profoundly negative change, no matter how many declare it be an improvement (see fig. 6). In contrast to Kobayashi's approval of this change among the students, she presents unease and skepticism, arguing that the norms of this 'good school' (e.g., rules mandating minimum skirt length, bans on eating in the halls, and even the norms of standardized test scores) are not an essential or objective truth, but 'fairly arbitrary' values (2: 108). Talking against a backdrop of faceless students lined up in rows, she describes how rules bind people, yet people end up accepting

those rules as 'truth,' to the point of even internalizing and running headfirst towards that "imposed truth" (*oshitsukuraretta shinjitsu*) (2: 111). On this point, Althusser would most likely both agree and disagree with her—agreeing that while schools falsely present themselves as a "neutral environment purged of ideology" (1297), he would most likely argue that the school's ideology is not arbitrary—it is the direct bourgeois, capitalist ideology of the ruling class.

Further Althussersian thought can also be seen in the method that the principal instills this change in the school. By having Kobayashi greet everyone with an enthusiastic "Good Morning!" to arriving students, this resembles Althusser's notion of "interpellation." According to Althusser's theories of social control, the rituals of everyday life are the rituals of ideological recognition: "ideology hails or interpellates individuals as subjects" (1306). In this analogy, similar to how saying "hello" will cause an individual to take notice and say "hello" back, by being addressed and recognized within the ideological system, an individual is forced to respond and acknowledge themselves within this system, becoming subject to it. Consequently, "Panopticon Act 2" opens with three-quarters of its first page dedicated solely to students saying "good morning" to each other, emphasizing the spread of both the ritual of ideological recognition and the principal's ideology.

Foucault's Panopticon, Reinterpreted

By contrast, elements of Michel Foucault's theories of Panopticonism are perhaps more indirectly referenced within Wakaki's "Panopticon," with a significant shift from Foucault's focus on observation by the state to the collective observation of the people. On the most direct front, the climax of the story centres on a conversation between Mako and the new principal, where Mako explains Jeremy Bentham's concept of the Panopticon as an analogy

for the school (see fig. 1). This analogy in turn resembles Foucault's interpretation of the Panopticon, but it differs in one critical aspect. Foucault, writing from his cultural and academic background on the history of prisons, imagines every prisoner completely isolated from the other, with "each individual, in his place, ... securely confined to a cell ... the side walls prevent him from coming into contact with his companions" (5). Wakaki, by contrast, imagines that the prisoners see across the prison into opposite cells—not just observing themselves, but each other as well (see fig. 7). Thus, while both writers relate the metaphor of the Panopticon to social control and internalized social behaviour, the relationship between other inmates within the Panopticon could not be more different.

Within *The Screw People*, this observational pressure of other inmates directly

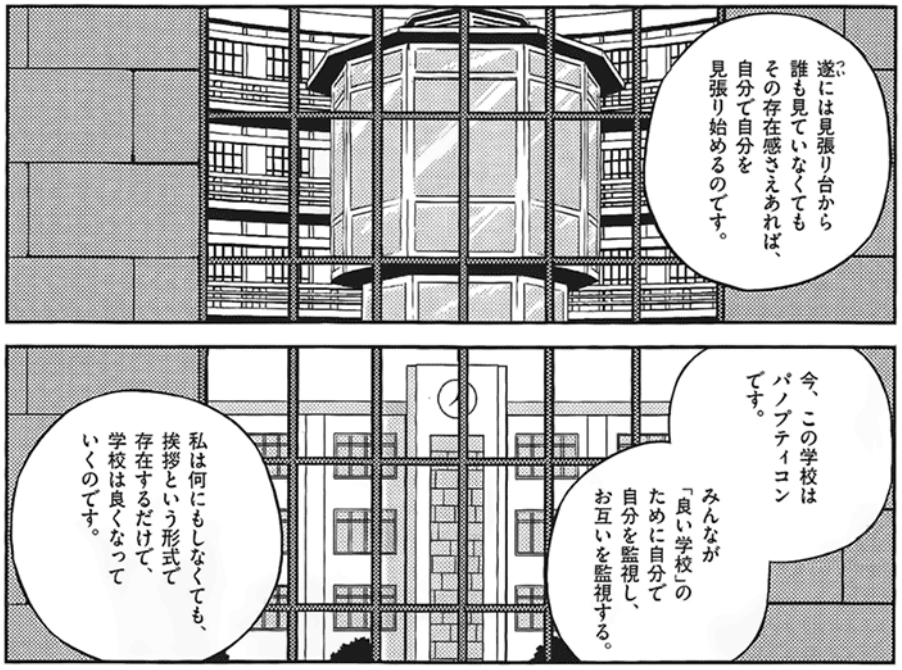

Fig. 7: Musings on the school as a Panopticon: "Finally, even if there's no one watching in the watchtower, as long as that presence is felt, the inmates will watch themselves;" "This school is now a Panopticon;" "Everyone's watching both themselves and everyone else so we can be a 'Good School'" (2: 116).

emerges when other students send well-intentioned letters to Mako and reach out to her to

encourage her to do better. For an author like Wakaki, this reflects how in practice, self-regulation emerges from the collective pressure of society around the individual, not from an unseen hierarchical superior. One can also contrast how Foucault's imagination of the school Panopticon is based on instilling moral behaviour through restricting students access to one another ("if they are schoolchildren, there is no copying, no noise, no chatter, no waste of time" [5-6]), whereas actual Japanese moral education practices are typically based around fostering self-perpetuating group consensus with class discussions over weekly moral goals (Sugimoto 144). In other words, whether it is Bentham's or Foucault's rendition, the Panopticon in Wakaki's Japanese context transforms into a collective observational force which self-regulates behaviour.

Conclusion

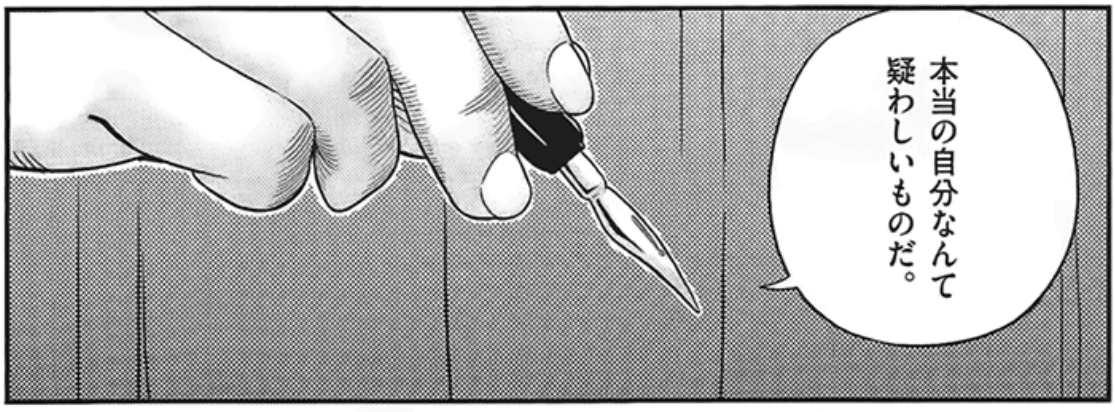

Fig. 8: The author, Wakaki, talks to his creations (2: 114).

Ultimately, *The Screw People*'s "Panopticon" reflects Wakaki's complicated relationship towards ideology, social control, and surveillance that is informed by the group-oriented Japanese culture he was raised in. On one hand, similar to Althusser and Foucault, Wakaki takes a skeptical stance towards instilled social values, directly critiquing them through Mako's arguments of how social values are arbitrary, determined by those in power, and

how they impose on those who do not conform to the same mould. For people like her, those metaphorical nails who sticks out, the new school is strange, disconcerting, and resembles unthinking indoctrination. On the other hand, while Kobayashi acknowledges Mako's arguments, she nonetheless decides to continue following the new school norms. For her, seeing people excited, motivated, and fulfilled is valuable, even if the values pushed by society are not objective or self-determined. In her final rebuttal, rather than seeing it as an 'imposed truth' (*Oshitsukerareta shinjitsu*), she asks Mako, "What's wrong with a gifted truth?" (*Ataerareta shinjitsu no nani ga ikenai no?*) (2: 112), shifting the framing of social ideals from an imposition forced onto people into ideas which may be accepted by the individual. Thus, in Wakaki's view, while thinking for one's self and determining one's own truths are fundamentally important, unlike within more individualistic frameworks, that does not mean those truths cannot be the shared common truths of one's collective society. For Western critical theory and pedagogy, which prize critical thinking, the challenging of conventional systems, and increasingly values the consideration of viewpoints outside of the Anglo-American-European tradition, this non-Western, non-challenging of convention is perhaps a position which challenges norms the most.

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