



Selling a story: Haruka Obata explains her research at a news conference regarding STAP cells in Kobe in January. | KYODO

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The truth is, we have gotten too used to lying

BY [MICHAEL HOFFMAN](#)

SPECIAL TO THE JAPAN TIMES

[ARTICLE HISTORY](#) | MAR 29, 2014

Philosophers love truth — that's a truism. What about the rest of us? Do we love truth or falsehood? Truth, we naturally affirm. So why are we swimming in falsehood?

Last fall, a peculiar scenario played out involving restaurant menus. They weren't true. You'd read one thing on the menu and be served something quite different. First came the revelation about restaurants run by Hankyu-Hanshin Hotels. Then it snowballed. One prestigious

establishment after another came forward with shame-faced mea culpas: We do it too. Hotel restaurants, department store restaurants. The Osaka Ritz-Carlton Hotel. Tokyo's Imperial Hotel. The Renaissance Sapporo Hotel. The Hotel Okura. Takashimaya Department Store.

What fools they made of us! How they must have laughed at us, sitting there dressed in our best clothes, smugly ordering the best fare, not even suspecting that the premium "kuruma shrimp" was really commonplace tiger shrimp, the high end "Miyazaki pork" was really middling Iwate pork, the "fresh" fruit juice was really frozen — and so on and so on.

Apologies were profuse but somewhat incoherent. "We never had the intention to deceive," said Hankyu-Hanshin's then-president, Hiroshi Desaki. Deception not intended to deceive? Maybe there is such a thing. Desaki resigned shortly afterward.

That comedy had no sooner left the stage than another came on. Title: "Japan's Beethoven." There is nothing obviously Beethovenian in composer Mamoru Samuragochi's music, but Samuragochi, like the German maestro, is deaf. Or is he? Well, no. Hard of hearing, yes, but it's not quite the same thing. To be "Japan's Beethoven" you have to be as deaf as Beethoven. You also, presumably, have to be a composer. Is Samuragochi one? Well, no. Did Beethoven have a ghostwriter? Samuragochi did — for 18 years. Then the ghostwriter came out of the closet and once more it was apology time.

First restaurants, then music — what next? Science?

"Any expert should have seen immediately that there was something strange about that person," Hiroshima University pathologist Koji Nanba tells *Shukan Bunshun* magazine. "That person" scarcely needs an introduction. She was, briefly, the most famous person in Japan. How many scientific breakthroughs anywhere in the world are this startling? Very few. How many of those very few are led by Japanese women? Very, very few, Japanese research being notoriously male-dominated. And if you go on to ask how many of those few leading female Japanese researchers are as young, pretty, media-savvy and radiant with star quality as Haruko Obokata, you descend to a level of rarity that explains — as the science, though exciting, hardly does — the media frenzy she stirred.

Barely 30 and already turning the world upside down! Stem cells show immense medical promise. Harvesting them from embryos is morally problematic. Producing them in the laboratory is difficult. If only an easy way could be found!

Obokata claimed to have found one. She met with resistance at first. She persisted. She conquered obstacles. Sometimes the going got so tough that "I cried all night." She's not only fiercely determined, she's tender, vulnerable and not ashamed to show it. She wore a traditional Japanese *kappogi* apron. Suddenly everyone had to have one. She not only *was* cool, she *defined* cool.

“The media went crazy over the ‘female science star’ bit, and over the kappogi,” says Nanba. (“We did too,” Shukan Bunshun admits contritely.) “The kappogi itself was a giveaway. With its wide sleeves and loose-fitting back, foreign bodies can easily get into it. It’s not laboratory dress. And the makeup and false eyelashes.” Few journalists, Nanba says, know much about science. But all journalists know about cool.

Apparent holes in the research and presentation somehow went unnoticed by Obokata’s employer, the government-affiliated Riken institute and by Nature, the prestigious British science journal that published the work. Subsequent scrutiny brought them to light — the apparent cribbing from the U.S. National Institute of Health website, the photograph borrowed, without citation, from Obokata’s own doctoral thesis.

“I’m not sure whether or not this was a deliberate attempt at falsification,” said Shunsuke Ishii, head of Riken’s investigative committee.

“If any other incidents of this nature have taken place, it would reflect a change in present-day scientific culture that I find very worrisome indeed,” said Riken Director and Nobel laureate Ryoji Noyori. The investigation continues.

The only comment from Obokata herself, so far, is, “I didn’t think I was doing anything wrong.”

If that’s true, it’s astonishing. A scientist doesn’t think it’s wrong to leave herself wide open to accusations of falsifying her data?

Science originally was inseparable from philosophy, and even now that they are separate disciplines, they remain united, supposedly, in their love of truth. Truth is the goal. If it’s not, it’s not science. That’s not moralism — it’s simple definition.

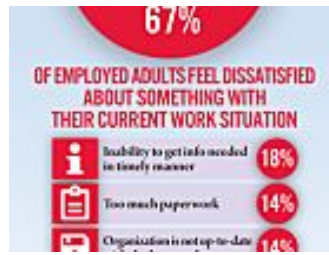
The question inevitably arises: Who can you trust? If not restaurants to serve what they say they’re serving, if not major artists to create their own work, if not scientists — who? The government?

That sounds like a cheap laugh line. Governments, we all know, have a long history of indifference to truth. And yet it’s important business we trust them with! The government led by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is eager to restart the nuclear reactors idled in the wake of the March 2011 Fukushima meltdowns. Economic recovery, as he sees it, depends on it. Is he above bending the truth, if necessary, to convince the public that nuclear power is safe?

In 1955 a young lawmaker named Yasuhiro Nakasone (who went on to serve as prime minister, 1982-87) declared in a speech to the Diet, “Nuclear power used to be a violent animal, but has now become a farm animal. Japan should increase its national strength through the promotion of nuclear power in an effort to gain a rightful place in the international community.”

Is it possible to succeed in life without lying? If not, are lies superior to truth? If so, what kind of corner have we painted ourselves into?

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