

# Japanese Society as a Place for Knowledge Creation and Cooperation

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## I

From June 30 to July 2 of this year [2015], the International Research Center for Japanese Studies (NICHIBUNKEN) in Kyoto hosted an international symposium titled “The Lost Decades and the Future of Japanese Studies.” The topic of that symposium closely correlates with the “lost decades” theme of the present symposium, and both themes originated in the thesis presented by Prof. Andrew Gordon. Since September 2014, I have conducted study sessions with several people participating in the present symposium in conjunction with Prof. Gordon’s project to reconsider “lost decades,” of which the NICHIBUNKEN symposium was a milestone. Today, I intend to summarize for you the outcomes of the Kyoto symposium from my own perspective.

First, I aim to introduce the contents of the NICHIBUNKEN symposium. (Refer to attached documents.)

Let me begin by explaining how the symposium came to be. *Nihon Kenkyū* (*Japanese Studies*), an academic journal of NICHIBUNKEN, was in the midst of planning a special issue under the direction of that publication’s editor, Hideto Tsuboi. The focus of the special issue was going to be the lost decades. The symposium theme and participant selection advanced under Professor Tsuboi’s guidance. The subject of deliberation for the symposium was the current status of and future outlook for Japanese studies amid changes in Japan’s position in the world within the context of global relations over the past 20 years. The participation of representative scholars of the contemporary philosophy, including Jun’ichi Isomae of NICHIBUNKEN and Naoki Sakai of Cornell University, as well as several emerging scholars of Japanese literature was another noteworthy feature of the event.

Since the presentations covered many subjects, providing a summary of the symposium was difficult. However, several themes emerged unexpectedly through the various symposium presentations and subsequent discussions. From my perspective, these can be summarized in the keywords *culture*, *local*, and *knowledge*.

## II

First, many presenters took issue with the label “lost.” Some had fundamental questions about what had been lost and by whom. Sakai suggested that the subject “lost” rests on the assumption of an inward-looking nation state. Steffi Richter averred that the period should be reinterpreted from the perspective of a sudden rise in the active cooperation and cultural movement of people living on the outer edges of capitalism, called the “precarariat.”

In this context, the first instance identified by Prof. Gordon of the use of the word “lost” is interesting to note. Prof. Gordon indicated that the word’s first appearances in connection to Japan occurred in July 1998. An article by Bill Powell in the July 27, 1998 issue of *Newsweek* (dated one week after the first printing) used the word in its title, “The Lost Decade,” as did a July 20, 1998 *Nikkei Shinbun* article titled “National Treasure: Lessons of the Lost Decade.” These articles indicated the closed nature of Japan’s financial markets, and they reported that overseas investors had begun to use the phrase “lost decade” to refer to Japan’s slowness in catching up to the global tide of financial reform. These origins suggest that the idea of Japan as a “lost” nation was initially advanced by non-Japanese voices and then internalized by Japanese society in a self-fulfilling manner. This is similar to Engelbert Kaempfer’s argument in *The History of Japan* that Japan’s status as a closed country was reverse imported at the end of the Edo period and became a self-fulfilling fact by Japanese.

The above discussion suggests the need for a reassessment of how accurately the word “lost” describes Japanese society in the years since 1990. Opinions questioning the phrase were abundant at the symposium. Those voicing such opinions argued that Japan has achieved significantly from a cultural perspective during this period. The success of Japanese culture, particularly pop culture, in attracting worldwide interest has been inversely proportional to the economic losses that the country suffered following the collapse of the economic bubble. The global popularity of Japanese cultural creations in the areas of *manga* and *anime* is widely known. Japanese film, architecture, and culinary culture have also been adopted in various areas of the world; for example, sushi and ramen are widely consumed across the globe. Japanese athletes are also active in the global sports arena. In Boston, the images of major league baseball players like Nomo, Matsuzaka, and Uehara remain fresh in our minds.

This global prevalence of Japanese culture elicited input from several participants on the vibrancy of Japanese studies. Interest in the field of Japanese language studies is particularly trending upward in China and Europe. The widespread passion for Japanese culture (though not for its traditional culture), especially contemporary mass

culture is certainly encouraging this trend. Curiosity is also a part of the equation. Although Japanese contemporary culture was previously seen as little more than a sub-culture, it has now assumed a prominent global position as a main culture.

However, it may be a bridge too far to conclude that the “lost decades” somehow helped produce the triumphant rise of Japanese culture. Actually, the problem is that as Japanese culture flourishes, Japanese society withers. At the same time, as substantial Japanese cultural contents are being accepted overseas, the international image of Japanese society tends toward a perception of Japanese otherness, or of Japan as a “strange and peculiar country.” It can be said that Japan’s societal image actually has worsened. Contributing to that problem are such problems as the political and economic elites’ efforts to cling to nuclear power even after the 3/11 Great East Japan Earthquake and the subsequent nuclear disaster, international condemnation of the Japanese political class’s treatment of the “comfort women” problem and of other issues of historical recognition, and the various barriers to the social advancement of women in Japan.

In Japan, it is unclear how deeply Japanese people feel the positive elements of the global propagation of Japanese culture. For the past twenty years, the Japanese have lived with a sense of collapse and stagnation. The aging society with declining birth rate, growing economic inequality, and the worsening of workplace conditions have all contributed to a sense of loss within the daily lives of Japanese people. However, similar problems can be found in many parts of the world. There is no reason why Japan should feel that it alone is a victim or live with a sense of defeat.

### III

Viewed in this way, Japan can be seen as a cluster of world problems. Participants in the NICHIBUNKEN symposium repeatedly underscored the need for a “theory.” Such a framework of thought would accurately explore the various problems embodied in Japan and consider options to address them.

Symposium participants averred that in order to develop such a theory, scholars need to extrapolate a definition of “local” and consider the question from that perspective. That suggestion rests on criticisms of the nation state concept. Because the nation state is usually the unspoken premise of deliberation, the symposium called for recognizing the emergence of various marginal voices to protect their disappearance in the context of the nation state. The symposium was challenged to pay heed to those voices. An example of such a marginalized group is the comfort women, whose plight has been overlooked amidst the tides of nationalism. Other examples include

the forgotten people of Fukushima after the Earthquake disaster as well as the precariat class that is forced into precarious anxiety by capitalism and globalization and raises its voice in solidarity.

How can we draw out such voices from the margins of the nation state and put them into a theory? The keyword that emerges here is “place.” This awakens us to an attention to locality, as they constitute the place where thought and speech emerge. Several presentations at the NICHIBUNKEN symposium, which focused on the unfairness in Fukushima and Okinawa, discussed in great detail the efforts to sublimate it in literary, religious, and philosophical terms. The symposium underscored the importance of listening to local “narratives” rooted in the serious experiences of daily life, which are not absorbed in the nation state “narratives”. The symposium also revealed the importance of putting those voices into theory at a more general level.

It is true that many such “discussions” that have survived on the Japanese archipelago have been pushed into the nation state framework amidst modernization since the Meiji era. Thus in post-Meiji Japan, history became “national” history (*kokushi*), Japanese became the “national” language (*kokugo*), and Japanese literature became a “national” literature (*oku-bungaku*). In recent years, however, some of the local features that were overshadowed amidst this move toward nation state thinking have been revived in scholarship. Although I regret to give such a personal example, the research of Wataru Enomoto, a Middle Ages scholar and associate professor at NICHIBUNKEN, shows that my hometown, Hakata, was a city of great international exchange during the Middle Ages, serving as a hub connecting Japan and the Chinese mainland. Many Zen Buddhist priests traveled to China from Hakata and returned with Buddhist scriptures, tea, and other cultural products in that land. That achievement in Hakata’s history has largely gone unnoticed. It has been said that the great Japanese religious revolution of the Middle Ages was the creation of Kamakura Buddhism, which inspired interest only in Kamakura and Kyoto, the supposed centers of religious history. Meanwhile, the role of Hakata, a marginal community, in international exchange was overlooked. I was shocked that I have not known such a fact, although I was born and brought up in Hakata. The people of Hakata also failed to recognize the rich seeds that their community had sown in history. It is time to restore that recognition.

A similar situation can be seen in other places around Japan. The symposium focused on the subjects of Fukushima and Okinawa, each as a local place representative of an element of contemporary or post-war Japan. One topic introduced in this regard was the practical activity of literature, religious studies, and contemporary philosophy in “translating” the “voiceless voices” (these are Junichi Isomae’s terms) produced and

buried in those local places. This kind of practical scholarship should be conducted throughout the Japanese archipelago. When such scholarship is conducted, it should also remain vigilant to avoid reducing the concept of “local” completely to characteristics specific to a certain region. As illustrated by the example of Hakata, history studies should not simply extrapolate local history but should place it in the context of a locality’s relations with the broader world. I believe that we need scholarship that recognizes the characteristics unique to a certain local place, while creating local places in the regions of Japan that aspire toward universality in terms of how their uniqueness connects to other regions around the globe. In taking this step, we may also need to revisit the very definition of Japan as a nation state.

#### IV

Considered from this perspective, “local” can be seen as a place that creates knowledge and disseminates that knowledge outward. Yijian Zhong, another symposium participant, proposed placing Japanese studies as a global knowledge-generating mechanism. That suggestion directly refers to the transformation of Japanese studies into something more closely aligned with the reorganization of knowledge and university studies, which is advancing on a global level. I think that the suggestion could be restructured by incorporating the “local” concept described above.

I would like to return to the keyword “culture” at this point. That Japanese culture, especially pop culture, has gained recognition over these past twenty years is certain. The Japanese government has sought to capitalize on this trend with a campaign called “Cool Japan,” which aims to direct the popularity of Japanese culture into cultural diplomacy. However, I think there might be a pitfall in these types of political measures. Takumi Sato, a media history scholar, criticizes Cool Japan as a simplistic strategy dependent on existing cultural products. Rather than branding products like Doraemon, Pokémon, and the works of author Haruki Murakami as Japanese, Sato contends that it would be more productive to direct attention toward the structural and societal conditions that facilitated the creation of those products. Culture should not be limited to a few complete products but should be understood as the shapes, styles, and traditions of society that facilitate such achievement. Only through this kind of understanding can Japan obtain recognition as a great bastion of culture that is able to constantly produce world-leading cultural products.

## V

I will now turn to the tentative conclusions of this report. What I intend to propose is a “Japan” composed of a collection of “local” places, and within that framework, we envision “Japan” as a knowledge-generating mechanism. Such an approach reconstructs the “local” as a place for the creation and dissemination of knowledge, and it boldly repositions the nation of Japan as a medium for bridging the gaps between Japan and other parts of the world and for organically integrating the “local.” Whether Japan remains “cool” and maintains its title as a cultural exporter depends upon the country’s ability to internalize a mechanism for the continuous and perpetual production of new culture, without exhausting the stable cultural reserves that already exist.

One descriptive theory to explain the secret of Japanese companies’ strength at the peak of the bubble era was advanced by Ikujiro Nonaka and Hirotaka Takeuchi. This theory, which described Japanese firms as “knowledge-creating companies,” took the world by storm. It described the concept of “tacit knowledge,” or a collective corporate culture, consisting of know-how and customs specific to individual companies, acquired over many years through each company’s activities, and that cannot easily be put into words. The real value of Japanese companies was seen in their ability to generate a process of cyclical knowledge creation by formalizing the tacit knowledge.

This example suggests that if Japan wishes to find itself after two lost decades, it should seek to become a knowledge-creating nation. Local and national knowledge can cooperate and feed into one another in response to Japan’s various problems cumulated, leading to the production of new knowledge. In this way, developing a theory of “Japan” can be seen as a challenging but realistic goal.

## References

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- Ikujiro Nonaka and Hirotaka Takeuchi, *The knowledge-creating Company : How Japanese Companies Create the Dynamics of Innovation*, Oxford, 1995.
- 磯前順一 『死者のざわめき——被災地信仰論』河出書房新社、2015年。
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- 酒井直樹 『死産される日本語・日本人——「日本」の歴史-地政的配置』講談社、2015年。
- 佐藤卓己、渡辺靖、柴内康文 『ソフト・パワーのメディア文化政策』新曜社、2012年。

## **June 30 (Tue)**

### Keynote Speech

ISOMAE Jun'ichi (International Research Center for Japanese Studies) :

After Fukushima: Domestic Colonization in the Postwar Japan and the Repose of the Soul

Commentator: SAKAI Naoki (Cornell University)

## **July 1 (Wed)**

### Session 1 : How Does the International Community View Japan and Its “Lost Decades”?

JANG In-Sung (Seoul University/International Research Center for Japanese Studies):

Conservatism and Political Aesthetics during Japan's Lost Decades

David LEHENY (Princeton University): The Politics of Loss in the Lost Decades

CHU Hueichu (Taiwan Chung Hsin University): Expressions of Violence in the Post-Cold War Era: Questions Presented by Okinawa and Fukushima

Reinhard ZÖLLNER (University of Bonn): East Asia and Janus: The Two Faces of Japan's Image

WANG Baoping (Zhejiang Gongshang University): Japanese Studies in China during the Lost Decades and Future Prospects

Commentators: Alex ZAHLTEN (Harvard University), Nanyan GUO (International Research Center for Japanese Studies)

### Session 2 : The Lost Decades and Prospects for Japanese Studies

Andrew GORDON (Harvard University): The Shifting Discourse of Japanese Particularity from the High Growth Era through the Lost Decades

Steffi RICHTER (Leipzig University): Twenty Years Lost—for Whom?

SAKAI Naoki (Cornell University): Japan in a Changing East Asia and World: Post-Colonial Conditions and Scholarship

SHIM Heechan (Ritsumeikan University): Consideration of the Meaning of Japanese Studies in Korea: From the Perspective of Japanese and Korean Anti-Symmetrism

ZHONG Yijiang (The University of Tokyo) The Potential of Japanese Studies as a Global Knowledge-generating Mechanism

Commentators: KIMURA Saeko (Tsuda College), Richard TORRANCE (Ohio State University/International Research Center for Japanese Studies)