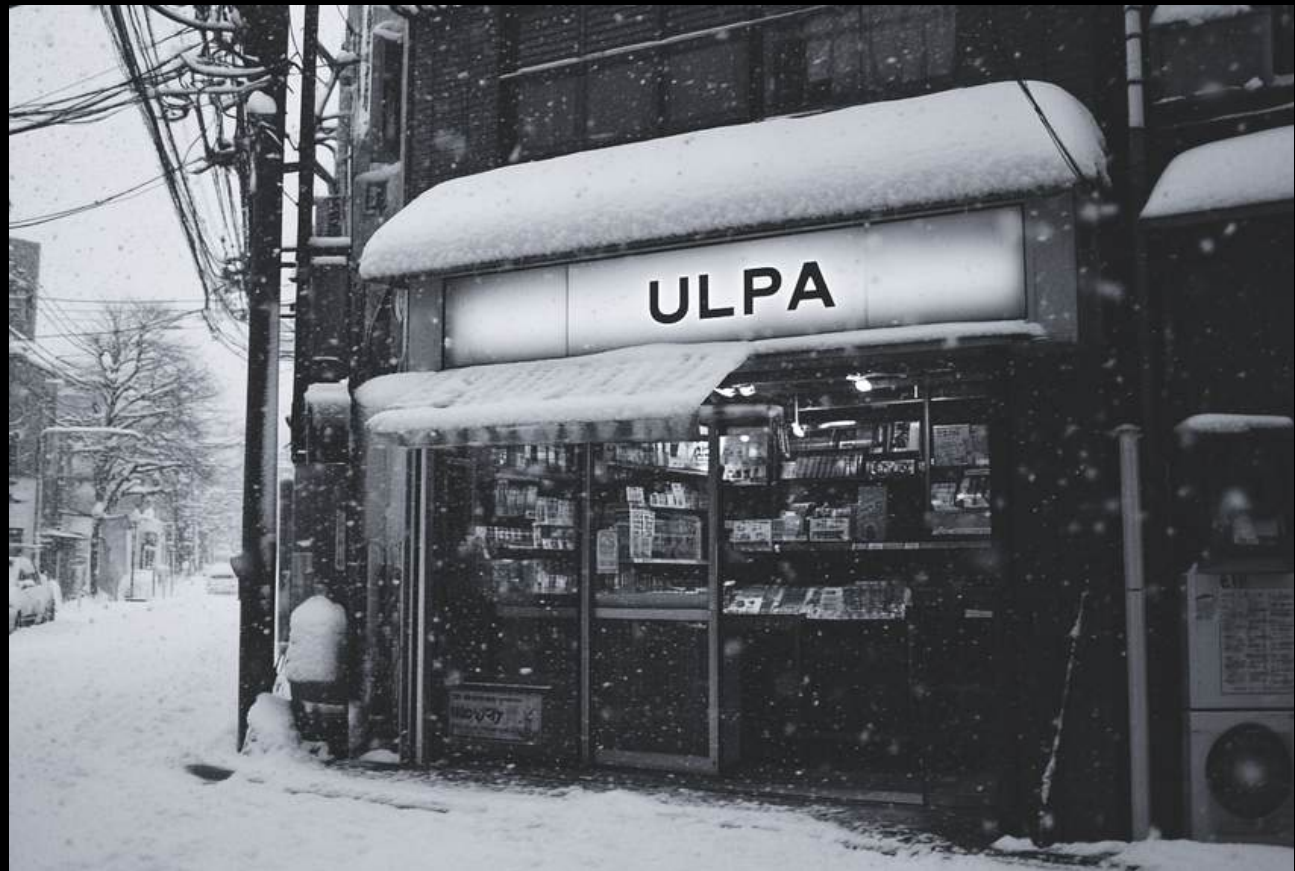


UZU

Monthly
Review

Be The Center Of The Whirlpool



**How Can It Not
Know What It Is?**

**Inside The
Whirlpool with
Mutsumi Ota**

**Cracking Japan's
Code**

**Who The Hell Was
Tsuneo Watanabe?**

**Japanese
Business
Etiquette 101**

**What If Purpose
Branding Could
Be A Bit More
Playful & A Lot
Less Heavy**

**Riding The
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Softbank**

**Nokotta, Nokotta,
Nokotta**

**Mr. Pink Was On
To Something**

**Business
Japanese For
People In A Rush**

**Now Read This!
Tokyo Underworld**

**The Last Train To
Transcendal**



JANUARY 2025

ISSUE NUMBER 6

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FROM THE EDITOR



Paul Ashton
Founder
ULPA

Happy New Year and welcome to the first issue of UZU for 2025! As we step into January, I hope this year brings you inspiration, success, and moments of discovery—both professionally and personally.

In this issue, UZU Issue Number 6, we continue to explore the fascinating intersections of branding, culture, and innovation. Our "Inside the Whirlpool" feature spotlights Mutsumi Ota, the visionary Founder of Giftee, who shares insights into building a digital gifting empire in Japan and beyond. His journey is a masterclass in cultural sensitivity and strategic foresight.

"Riding the Kuroshio" this month focuses on SoftBank, tracing its rise from humble beginnings to a global

powerhouse under Masayoshi Son's bold leadership. It's a story of ambition, resilience, and the power of vision—a perfect narrative for kicking off a new year.

Gordon McLean, Founder of Fear No Truth, returns with a compelling piece on the role of playfulness in purpose branding. He challenges us to think differently about how brands can make an impact while fostering joy and connection. Gordon's insights are as sharp and thought-provoking as ever.

For history enthusiasts, "Who the Hell Was Tsuneo Watanabe?" uncovers the complex legacy of a media mogul who shaped modern Japan.

Our popular columns are here to guide you through Japan's unique business landscape. Japanese Business Etiquette 101 takes on "Nemawashi," the critical practice of consensus-building in Japan, while Business Japanese for People in a Rush provides quick, practical tips to sharpen your communication skills.

I'm particularly excited about our book review this month, featuring Tokyo Underworld, a gripping account of Japan's post-war transformation through the lens of organized crime. It's a must-read for anyone looking to understand the undercurrents shaping Japan's unique landscape.

Thank you for being part of UZU's journey. Here's to another year of curiosity, creativity, and growth. Let's keep that whirlpool spinning!

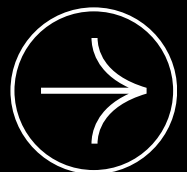




Image: Bladerunner

HOW CAN IT NOT KNOW WHAT IT IS?

BY PAUL ASHTON

03



In the late 1980s, Japan was everything America feared and everything the world envied. Tokyo had become the financial epicentre of the world. The Nikkei hit record highs, Japanese companies claimed eight of the world's ten largest spots, and their GDP per capita soared 10% higher than America's. It wasn't just a financial reality; it was a cultural moment. Japanese conglomerates snapped up prized assets, including the Rockefeller Center, the crown jewel of American real estate at the time. Even Hollywood couldn't help but imagine a future with Japan at the helm, with films like Blade Runner portraying a neon-tinged dystopia ruled by Japanese influence.

But by the turn of the decade, the unthinkable happened: the bubble burst. Between 1990 and 1992, Japan's stock market lost over \$1 trillion, and real estate prices plummeted, erasing an additional \$3 trillion. A nation that once seemed untouchable was now mired in economic wreckage from which it would never truly recover. The collapse of the 90s didn't just usher in a "lost decade"; it began a malaise that has stretched into its third consecutive decade. Japan, once an unstoppable economic miracle, is now a symbol of stagnation and decline, a cautionary tale of greed, hubris, and a refusal to adapt.

To understand why Japan fell, you must first understand why it rose. In the wake of World War II, Japan had nothing but rubble and resolve. Its factories were destroyed, its labour force decimated, and its economy on the brink. Fearing Japan might follow China into communism, the United States intervened aggressively, fueling Japan's recovery with low-interest loans, industrial support, and military spending during the Korean War. The results were spectacular. Japanese exports surged, and the Ministry of Trade and Industry pivoted the nation from cheap textiles to high-tech manufacturing and industrial dominance.



“IN THE WAKE OF WORLD WAR II, JAPAN HAD NOTHING BUT RUBBLE AND RESOLVE.”





Japan rebuilt its factories with the most advanced technologies on Earth, effectively leapfrogging competitors and creating a manufacturing juggernaut. By the 1970s, Japan had become the world's preferred exporter. Their cars, electronics, and consumer goods, precise, high-quality, and reliable, dominated global markets. Toyota, Sony, and Panasonic weren't just companies; they were emblems of Japan's engineering genius. Wealth flooded the country, and for the first time, Japanese citizens savoured the rewards of decades of hard work. Luxury brands flocked to Tokyo's Ginza district, finding record-breaking sales among a population eager to display its newfound prosperity.

Yet the seeds of Japan's downfall were planted in its success. In the 1980s, Japan's booming economy turned into a frenzy of speculation. Cheap credit and low-interest rates encouraged a culture of borrowing and gambling, not on stocks or businesses, but on land. Real estate became a national obsession; prices soared to insane heights. By some estimates, the Imperial Palace grounds in Tokyo were worth more than all the real estate in California. Banks, flush with capital and confidence, handed out loans without caution, collateralised by these grotesquely inflated land values.

Then came the Plaza Accords in 1985. Pressured by Western allies, Japan agreed to appreciate the yen to help rebalance global trade rapidly. The yen strengthened dramatically, making Japanese exports far more expensive and reducing demand. In response, Japan did what it always did: it leaned on debt. The government slashed interest rates even further, sending easy money into the economy. This fueled the fire of speculation to catastrophic levels. When reality finally caught up in 1990, the bubble imploded. Land and stock values plummeted overnight, leaving Japan's economy in free fall.

“WEALTH FLOODED THE COUNTRY, AND FOR THE FIRST TIME, JAPANESE CITIZENS SAVOURED THE REWARDS OF DECADES OF HARD WORK.”



And yet, the greatest tragedy wasn't the crash itself; it was what came afterwards. Other nations have faced financial meltdowns and rebounded, often more potent for it. But Japan froze. When banks were left drowning in bad debt, the government refused to let them fail. Insolvent institutions were propped up and allowed to operate as "zombie banks," technically alive but incapable of contributing to the economy. Instead of cutting their losses and moving forward, Japan delayed, enabling these banks to lend to unproductive businesses with no future. The result was a decade of paralysis, where bad loans piled up and innovation ground to a halt.

As the government stumbled through the 1990s, its fiscal policies compounded the crisis. Stimulus spending was minimal and poorly targeted, poured into rural infrastructure projects that did little to drive economic activity. Bridges, roads, dams and white elephant projects like modern art museums and seldom-used sports stadiums, monuments to waste, sprang up in places where no one needed them, while urban centres, the actual engines of economic growth, were left underfunded. Meanwhile, consumer confidence took repeated hits, especially after a disastrous decision to raise the consumption tax in 1997. Just as the economy showed signs of life, the tax hike crushed household spending and plunged Japan back into recession.

By the turn of the millennium, Japan's central bank had slashed interest rates to zero, but



“CONSUMER CONFIDENCE TOOK REPEATED HITS, ESPECIALLY AFTER A DISASTROUS DECISION TO RAISE THE CONSUMPTION TAX IN 1997.”



it was too late. The country had entered a liquidity trap where even free money couldn't spur borrowing or investment. Deflation took hold, with prices falling year after year, discouraging spending and deepening the cycle of stagnation. It wasn't until 2001 that Japan finally turned to quantitative easing, but after a decade of inaction, the damage was irreversible.

Japan's corporate culture was at the heart of this inertia, a regressive, cronyistic system built on loyalty, hierarchy, and stagnation. Banks and businesses, tied together through cozy relationships with regulators, protected the status quo at all costs. Failing companies were kept alive, choking out competition and innovation. Productivity growth slowed to a crawl, as Japan's vaunted corporations refused to adapt to a changing world. This was a culture where working long hours mattered more than working smart. Face time and subordination replaced creativity and results.

And here lies Japan's greatest existential crisis. Much like the replicants in Blade Runner, Japan seems trapped in its own bubble, disconnected from the harsh realities of what it has become. The world has changed, yet Japan's economy often feels like it's still living in the haze of its post-bubble euphoria, as though no reckoning ever occurred. To truly recover, Japan must confront the uncomfortable truth: it no longer knows what it is. The illusion of prosperity, the inertia of its traditions, and the weight of its own past success have clouded its identity.



“WORKING LONG HOURS MATTERED MORE THAN WORKING SMART. FACE TIME AND SUBORDINATION REPLACED CREATIVITY AND RESULTS.”



But there is hope in rediscovery. Japan's start-up economy is showing signs of life for the first time in decades. Young, ambitious entrepreneurs are beginning to shake off the dust of the old system and bring fresh innovation to the table. Venture capital is trickling in, and the government, albeit cautiously, is starting to recognise that protecting the past will not build the future. The walls around immigration are beginning to crack ever so slightly as the need for global talent becomes undeniable.

It's a change that's come far too late, about 15 years too late. But it is happening. If Japan can sustain this momentum for another ten years, its leaders can embrace reform, and its culture can reimagine what it means to succeed, there is a path forward. A second renaissance is not impossible. Will Japan reclaim the impossible heights of the 1980s? Doubtful. But will it improve on its current position? It must.

For a nation whose greatest achievements were built on resilience and reinvention, the answers lie within. To know yourself, to know what you are, is the root of all soul-searching and all transformation. Japan's future depends not on the echoes of its past but on its ability to break free from its illusions and redefine itself for a new age. The sun that once set so harshly on Japan now has a chance to rise again, and this time, whether it soars or sputters will determine the soul of the nation for generations to come.



“TO KNOW YOURSELF, TO KNOW WHAT YOU ARE, IS THE ROOT OF ALL SOUL-SEARCHING AND ALL TRANSFORMATION.”





Image: BYD

CRACKING JAPAN'S CODE

BY PAUL ASHTON



BYD has done what I thought was impossible. When the Chinese automaker announced its entry into Japan in 2023, I rolled my eyes. Another foreign company, charging headfirst into the most insular car market on the planet, hoping to succeed where so many others had failed. It felt naive, almost comical. Japan, after all, doesn't just love its domestic automakers, it reveres them. The streets are dominated by Toyotas, Hondas, and Nissans, with their relentless cycle of updates, endless model variations, and deeply ingrained consumer loyalty. Even the mighty Hyundai, with all its global clout, has floundered here, its footprint a rounding error compared to the teeming ranks of domestic brands. And yet, less than two years later, BYD has proven me spectacularly wrong.

What's most remarkable is not just that BYD has managed to establish a presence, it's how quickly they've turned a whisper of a brand into a name that consumers are beginning to recognise, even trust. It's a feat that has less to do with luck or brute force and everything to do with strategy. BYD is rewriting the rulebook for foreign companies in Japan, showing an understanding of the market that I didn't think a newcomer could muster.

Their approach has been nothing short of audacious. It starts with their marketing. In a country where trust is hard-won and first impressions last, BYD launched with a nationwide TV campaign that was equal parts stunning and strategic. Featuring the beloved actress Masami Nagasawa, the ads were both futuristic and warmly human, painting BYD not as an outsider trying to break in, but as a technology-driven, eco-conscious



“IT’S A FEAT THAT HAS LESS TO DO WITH LUCK OR BRUTE FORCE AND EVERYTHING TO DO WITH STRATEGY.”



friend already at home in Japan. The tagline, roughly translating to “The more you know, the more you’ll like it, BYD!”, is the kind of confident, yet humble, messaging that resonates with a Japanese audience. It acknowledges the scepticism, meets it head-on, and then gently, persistently wins you over.

What’s clever is how they followed up on this with a campaign that wasn’t just about flashy cars, but about demystifying EV technology for a public that remains wary of it. BYD didn’t assume they could win people over with price or specifications alone. Instead, they hosted EV fairs, allowed potential customers to test-drive their cars, and encouraged questions. It was hands-on, personal, and rooted in building relationships, precisely what the Japanese consumer demands.

Even their choice of dealerships reflects this cultural sensitivity. BYD partnered with established local networks, taking over spaces previously occupied by prestigious brands like Jaguar. These aren’t just business decisions they’re symbolic gestures. By embedding themselves in spaces already familiar and trusted, BYD positioned themselves not as intruders, but as a natural part of the landscape.

But let’s talk about the cars themselves, because they are perhaps the most surprising piece of the puzzle. BYD hasn’t fallen into the trap of many foreign brands, thinking that Japanese consumers are clamouring for Western or Chinese interpretations of what a car should be. Instead, they’ve tailored their



“IT WAS HANDS-ON, PERSONAL, AND ROOTED IN BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS, PRECISELY WHAT THE JAPANESE CONSUMER DEMANDS.”





lineup with an almost obsessive attention to what works in Japan. The ATTO 3, a compact SUV, and the Dolphin, a small electric car, are perfectly suited to the country's narrow streets and dense urban environments. They're practical, affordable, and technologically advanced in a way that feels meaningful rather than gratuitous. Heated seats for icy winters? Check. Parking assist for tight urban spaces? Check. And their proprietary Blade Battery technology, with its blend of safety, range, and cost-efficiency, answers the lingering concerns many Japanese consumers still have about EVs.

The pricing is the killer move. BYD's vehicles undercut competitors like Tesla by a significant margin, and even challenge Japanese hybrids on cost. The Dolphin starts at around ¥2.5 million—a price point that isn't just competitive, it's disruptive. For families looking to move beyond hybrids but unwilling to splurge on a Tesla, BYD offers a clear, compelling alternative.

What's striking is how this positioning outflanks both local automakers and Tesla. The Japanese giants, with their focus still largely on hybrids, seem to be caught in a holding pattern, unable to fully commit to EVs. Tesla, on the other hand, dazzles but doesn't reach. It remains aspirational, a status symbol for the elite. BYD, in contrast, speaks directly to the middle class—a segment too often ignored in the electric car revolution. They've found the sweet spot between affordability and aspiration, creating a product that feels both innovative and accessible.

“THE JAPANESE GIANTS, WITH THEIR FOCUS STILL LARGELY ON HYBRIDS, SEEM TO BE CAUGHT IN A HOLDING PATTERN.”





There's something almost poetic about how quickly BYD has gained traction in Japan. It speaks to the power of persistence and an almost ruthless clarity of vision. They saw what others missed—the gaps in the market, the missteps of their competitors—and moved with precision. Japanese automakers, for all their might, have been complacent. They've relied on their dominance, on the cultural inertia that has kept foreign brands at bay for decades. BYD didn't play by the same rules. They didn't try to beat Toyota and Honda at their own game—they changed the game altogether.

Tesla, too, should be worried. For all its innovation, Tesla still feels like a brand with a ceiling in Japan. It's beloved by enthusiasts, sure, but it doesn't yet have the mass appeal required to truly dominate. BYD, with its omnichannel marketing and its relentless focus on affordability and practicality, is the brand that could finally bring EVs to the masses here.

There's a delicious irony in watching a Chinese automaker—long dismissed by Japanese consumers as a producer of cheap, low-quality vehicles—emerge as a serious contender in this market. It's a reminder of how quickly things can change in the world of business, and how dangerous it is to underestimate a competitor willing to play the long game.

I don't think BYD's rise in Japan is a fluke. It's a blueprint. They've shown that even in the most closed-off, challenging markets, there's always a way in—if you're willing to listen, adapt, and take risks. And while I'm still getting used to the idea of a Chinese carmaker outpacing the likes of Toyota and Honda in their own backyard, one thing is clear: BYD isn't just building cars. They're building a future. And they're doing it in a way that even the most sceptical among us can't help but admire.

“THEY'VE SHOWN THAT EVEN IN THE MOST CLOSED-OFF, CHALLENGING MARKETS, THERE'S ALWAYS A WAY IN.”





Image: FEARNOTRUTH

WHAT IF PURPOSE BRANDING COULD BE A BIT MORE PLAYFUL & A LOT LESS HEAVY?

BY GORDON MCLEAN



In recent years, brand purpose has emerged as a cornerstone of modern business strategy. Companies are expected not just to sell products, but to stand for something, whether it's combating climate change, promoting social equity, or advocating for wellness. These are noble and necessary goals, but let's face it: the conversation around brand purpose can feel awfully heavy. It's all about urgency, responsibility, and doing the hard, serious work of making the world a better place.

But what if brand purpose didn't have to feel so burdensome? What if brands could save the planet, uplift communities, and still have a little fun along the way? In fact, what if a playful approach could make brand purpose more effective, engaging, and, ultimately, more impactful?

The idea might seem glib, after all, the stakes are high. But playfulness is not about trivializing the issues; it's about approaching them with creativity, optimism, and energy. By making purpose a bit more lighthearted, brands can inspire action, foster deeper connections, and stand out in an increasingly purpose-driven marketplace.

The current model of brand purpose often carries a tone of solemnity. Think of the marketing campaigns that depict desolate landscapes, ominous voiceovers, or heartbreaking statistics. These messages are designed to spur action by highlighting the gravity of the issues at hand. And while they succeed in raising awareness, they can also leave audiences feeling overwhelmed, powerless, or disconnected.



“WHAT IF BRANDS COULD SAVE THE PLANET, UPLIFT COMMUNITIES, AND STILL HAVE A LITTLE FUN ALONG THE WAY?”



Heavy messaging often translates to heavy expectations for consumers, too. People are asked to buy into a brand's mission—not just with their wallets, but with their emotions and values. For some, this can feel like yet another demand in a world already saturated with calls to do more, be better, and fix everything. When purpose feels heavy, it risks alienating the very people it's meant to engage. It also limits a brand's ability to spark the kind of joyful, collective energy needed to drive lasting change. Playfulness isn't just about having fun; it's a mindset that encourages creativity, curiosity, and connection. In the context of brand purpose, playfulness can be a powerful tool for inspiring action and fostering loyalty.

1. Play Breaks Down Barriers

Serious messaging can feel intimidating or exclusive, particularly for people who don't see themselves as part of the solution. Playfulness, on the other hand, is inviting. It creates a sense of accessibility and possibility, making it easier for people to engage with a brand's mission on their own terms.

2. Joy Fuels Action

People are more likely to act when they feel inspired and energized rather than guilty or pressured. Playful campaigns can infuse purpose with a sense of optimism and momentum, turning big, daunting problems into opportunities for collective creativity and celebration.

3. Creativity Sparks Innovation

Instead of relying on traditional narratives of sacrifice and struggle, a more playful approach



“WHEN PURPOSE FEELS HEAVY, IT RISKS ALIENATING THE VERY PEOPLE IT’S MEANT TO ENGAGE.”





can help brands find new ways to tell their stories, connect with audiences, and create impact.

4. Play Builds Community

Purpose-driven brands thrive on building communities around shared values. Playfulness fosters connection by creating moments of joy and shared experience. Whether it's through a clever campaign, a participatory initiative, or a sense of humor, play brings people together in meaningful ways.

Several brands are already showing us how playfulness can amplify purpose:

Patagonia: Known for its environmental activism, Patagonia takes its purpose seriously—but it's not afraid to have fun. From cheeky taglines like “Don't Buy This Jacket” to quirky campaigns about the joys of repairing old gear, the brand uses humor and playfulness to make sustainability feel relatable and empowering.

Oatly: The plant-based milk company tackles serious issues like climate change and animal welfare, but it does so with irreverent humor and a distinctive voice. Oatly's playful packaging, whimsical ads, and tongue-in-cheek approach make its mission feel fresh and approachable.

Guayakí Yerba Mate: Positioned as a force for planetary regeneration, Guayakí infuses its purpose with energy and vibrancy. By framing its mission as a celebration of nature and community, the brand invites consumers to join in the joy of creating a more sustainable world.

“PURPOSE-DRIVEN BRANDS THRIVE ON BUILDING COMMUNITIES AROUND SHARED VALUES.”



These brands prove that playfulness doesn't dilute purpose—it amplifies it. They show that you can tackle big issues without losing your sense of wonder, humor, or creativity.

Here are some ways brands can embrace a more playful approach to purpose:

1. Tell Stories That Inspire Joy

Instead of focusing solely on the problems, highlight the solutions—and the joy of participating in them. Celebrate progress, showcase positive impacts, and invite consumers to imagine a brighter future.

2. Use Humor Wisely

Humor can be a powerful tool for breaking down barriers and building rapport. The key is to use it thoughtfully and authentically, ensuring it aligns with your brand's tone and mission.

3. Encourage Participation

Playful purpose thrives on interaction. Create campaigns or initiatives that invite consumers to participate in fun, meaningful ways—whether it's through challenges, games, or creative collaborations.

4. Redefine Success

Purpose doesn't always have to be framed as a lofty, world-changing goal. Sometimes, it's about the small wins: planting a tree, supporting a local community, or simply bringing a smile to someone's face.



“YOU CAN TACKLE BIG ISSUES WITHOUT LOSING YOUR SENSE OF WONDER, HUMOR, OR CREATIVITY.”





5. Stay Authentic

Playfulness should never feel forced or performative. It needs to come from an authentic place, grounded in your brand's values and mission.

The challenges we face as a planet are immense. Climate change, social inequity, and systemic injustice require urgent and sustained action. But that doesn't mean we have to approach these challenges with nothing but solemnity. In fact, a playful mindset might be exactly what we need to spark the creativity, collaboration, and resilience required to tackle these issues head-on.

Playful purpose is about finding joy in the work of making the world a better place. It's about recognizing that saving the planet doesn't have to feel like a chore, it can be a celebration. It's about inviting people to join the movement, not because they feel obligated, but because they're inspired by the possibility of what we can create together.



Gordon McLean
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Gordon is the Founder of Fear No Truth, a partner company of Ulpa.

In his career he has launched, built and reinvented some of the world's best brands; including Apple, Bacardi, Bank of Scotland, Bing, Bombay Sapphire, EA Games, GE, Gillette, Grey Goose, Guinness, Halifax, Hilton, Holiday Inn Express, HSBC, Perfect Day, Radisson, Sandy Hook Promise, SAP, ServiceNow, Vodafone, and Wells Fargo.

He has a body of work that's been recognised for its commercial impact by the IPA and Effies, for its strategic thinking by the Jay Chiats and ARF, for its cultural impact by the MoMA, Emmys and TED, and for its creative excellence by The Clios, One Show, Cannes Lions, D&AD, and others.

“A PLAYFUL MINDSET MIGHT BE EXACTLY WHAT WE NEED TO SPARK THE CREATIVITY, COLLABORATION, AND RESILIENCE REQUIRED TO TACKLE THESE ISSUES HEAD-ON.”





Image: UZU

INSIDE THE WHIRLPOOL with MUTSUMI OTA



This month's edition of Inside the Whirlpool is, well, a little closer to home. Let me set the stage...

When I joined giftee as Head of Global Sales back in July last year, I stepped into a company that's quietly woven itself into the fabric of daily life in Japan. If you've ever sent a Starbucks eGift or received a LINE gift, you've already been part of the giftee story—even if you didn't realize it.

giftee's journey began in 2010 with just one person and a bold idea. Fast forward to today, it's the digital gifting leader in Japan, with operations expanding across Southeast Asia and the Middle East, thanks to its acquisition of YouGotaGift. It's not just a company; it's a bridge builder—connecting people, businesses, and communities through the power of eGifts.

Their corporate vision? "To provide services that nurture the ties between people, businesses, and townships through eGifts." And they deliver on it with four distinct offerings: the giftee-C2C platform, eGift System, giftee for Business, and the eMachi platform for regional revitalization.

My first brush with giftee was during the pandemic, when I used the "Go To Travel" system backed by the Japanese government. Surprise, surprise, giftee powered the local voucher digital side of that too.

So, who better to sit down with this month than the visionary behind it all? Mutsumi Ota, giftee's Founder and CEO. We'll dive into the story of how giftee became a household name, and I'll fire off ten burning questions to get the inside scoop. Let's see what we uncover.



"I STEPPED INTO A COMPANY THAT'S QUIETLY WOVEN ITSELF INTO THE FABRIC OF DAILY LIFE IN JAPAN."





What inspired you to start your business in Japan?

In 2007, when I graduated from university, SNS was just starting to become popular in Japan. Relationships with real-life friends began to be connected online. On SNS, congratulatory messages such as "Happy Birthday!" were often exchanged, but I felt that messages alone were boring, and there were also cases where we couldn't meet and celebrate the birthday. In such cases, I thought it would be nice to be able to send a small gift along with an online message, so I came up with a system where a casual gift such as a cup of coffee or a donut could be sent in the form of an electronic ticket and redeemed at a nearby store.

How does Japan's business culture shape your approach?

In Japan, there is a cultural obligation to give something in return whenever you receive a gift, so I aimed for a gift that would be so simple and casual that no return gift would be necessary. By sending just a cup of coffee, both the giver and the recipient can exchange gifts in a relaxed, easygoing way.

What was a key moment that helped you succeed in Japan?

The biggest turning point was around 2014, when we were approached by companies asking if we could use them as rewards for completing surveys. For corporate use, orders can be placed in units of 1,000 even if the unit price is 100 to 200 yen, so the scale of the business can be large. The challenges faced by companies were also significant, as up until then, when sending paper or plastic gift certificates as giveaways, delivery, packaging, and labor costs were incurred. With e-gifts, however, all that is required is to send a URL by email, which was well received as a major cost reduction, and from then on demand from companies grew significantly.

"I THOUGHT IT WOULD BE NICE TO BE ABLE TO SEND A SMALL GIFT ALONG WITH AN ONLINE MESSAGE."



How do you build strong relationships with clients and partners here?

giftee's customers are diverse, including food and beverage retail brands that issue e-gifts, and individuals, corporations, and local governments that purchase e-gifts. In particular, giftee is focusing on building relationships with brands that issue e-gifts as it develops its e-gift platform business. The eGift System is a measure that brands can use to expand gift demand and also leads to the development of new customers. Therefore, giftee not only issues e-gifts, but also supports distribution to individuals, corporations, and local governments as a partner that develops gift demand, making full use of our sales network. In addition to e-gifts, we also provide a wide range of support to accompany brands in the digitalization of their digital initiatives, such as the digitalization of shareholder benefits, the generation of coupons, e-tickets, and coupons, so that we can support brands in their overall digital transformation.

How do you handle Japan's regulatory requirements? Each service has its own regulations and guidelines, but we comply with them as we develop our business. On the other hand, there are cases where e-gifts are an innovation in complying with regulations and guidelines. For example, incentives in the insurance industry. In 2017, the Financial Services Agency and insurance industry groups issued notices calling for the self-restraint of gift certificate distribution, and as a result, the act of giving gift certificates as gifts in insurance solicitation became prohibited in principle. The view that not only gift certificates but also gift certificates such as book vouchers and beer vouchers are inappropriate became a common understanding in

WE PROVIDE A WIDE RANGE OF SUPPORT TO HELP BRANDS IN THE DIGITALIZATION OF THEIR DIGITAL INITIATIVES, SUCH AS THE DIGITIZATION OF SHAREHOLDER BENEFITS.



334 companies

Contents Partner
Total amount of eGift issuer
(As of end of Sep.2024)



78.3 B JPY

Distribution Volume
(The cumulative total from
Jan.2024 to Sep.2024)



2.27 M users

Users registered to "giftee"
(As of end of Sep.2024)



1,736 clients

Distribute Partner
Clients using eGift
(The unique count from
Jan.2024 to Sep.2024)





the insurance industry, and a trend of "not distributing gift certificates" spread in the field. However, gifts with a narrow range of uses and low social appropriateness are permitted to a certain extent, and e-gifts, which can be exchanged for specific products provided by giftee, fall into this category, making it possible to provide a solution that can be used as an incentive for campaigns, etc. while complying with the Insurance Business Act.

What role does innovation play in your strategy?

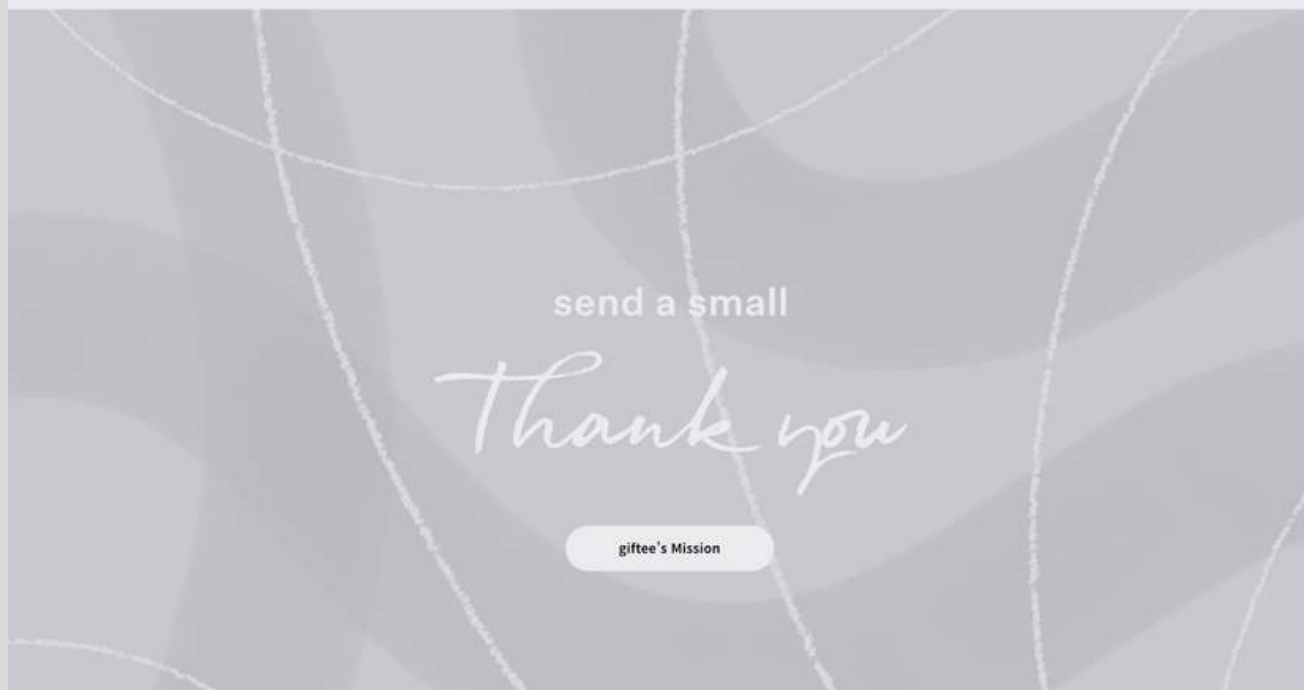
Innovation is an indispensable factor for a company's growth. At giftee, meeting with clients are often becomes the source of our innovation. We have seen many times how a small comment made during a client meeting can spark the creation of a new service.

Can you share a marketing tactic that worked well in Japan?

Although the number of brands issuing e-gifts has increased, there was a time when it felt like there was a problem with their popularity in CtoC. At that time, a service aimed at corporations, giftee for Business, had a positive impact on sales and led to CtoC distribution. giftee for business is a service that allows corporations to purchase e-gifts and use them as incentives for their own campaigns, and it is the ToC, i.e. consumers, who ultimately receive the e-gifts. Consumers can experience e-gifts for free through corporate campaigns, and when they realize how convenient e-gifts are, they are motivated to purchase them and give them to friends and family. This became the measure that boosted CtoC distribution.

"WE HAVE SEEN MANY TIMES HOW A SMALL COMMENT MADE DURING A CLIENT MEETING CAN SPARK THE CREATION OF A NEW SERVICE."





What skills are crucial for success in Japan?

It may not be a “skill” in the usual sense, but I’m always mindful of building up a “trust bank” with clients. Naturally, fulfilling what they ask for is a given, but sometimes offering unexpected outputs or insights can further strengthen their confidence in you. Once a solid relationship of trust is established, clients may start consulting you on topics they never would have before, and you’ll receive more genuine feedback—both of which greatly contribute to business growth.

How do you balance respecting tradition with introducing new ideas?

In Japan, there are many traditional gift-giving events, such as summer and winter gifts- Ochugen&Oseibo, wedding and birth celebrations. These events are important because they provide an opportunity to convey feelings of gratitude and congratulations to others, and giftee also values them. Meanwhile, the format of gifts has changed from the traditional physical gifts to forms that fit the times with the development of technology, and one of these is e-gifts, which are digital gifts. giftee's services are born from the fusion of tradition and new ideas. Furthermore, the birth of e-gifts has also created an opportunity to create a new gift-giving scene, where small everyday expressions of gratitude or apologies can be casually conveyed with a gift.

“ONCE A SOLID RELATIONSHIP OF TRUST IS ESTABLISHED, CLIENTS MAY START CONSULTING YOU ON TOPICS THEY NEVER WOULD HAVE BEFORE.”





What one piece of advice would you give to newcomers entering Japan?

I have seen many foreign companies enter the Japanese market, and I believe that those which succeed often excel at localizing for Japan. Some have become so well integrated that you wouldn't even realize they're foreign unless someone told you. What these successful companies seem to have in common is a thorough analysis of Japanese culture. They research how their Japanese counterparts conduct business and initially launch their operations by adhering to that format. Then, as they gain more clients and brand recognition, they gradually reveal their own unique characteristics.

Many thanks to Ota san for this time spent answering these questions, and sharing his insights. Sameless plug warning! If anyone is interested joining the team at giftee, feel free to reach out to myself or visit the [giftee career site](#) for more information. plenty of roles looking to be filled, particularly in corporate management, and our technical development teams.



Are you a founder or CEO in Japan? [Get in touch](#) and be featured in the next edition of Inside The Whirlpool! [Say Hello!](#)

Mutsumi Ota
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“WHAT THESE SUCCESSFUL COMPANIES SEEM TO HAVE IN COMMON IS A THOROUGH ANALYSIS OF JAPANESE CULTURE.”





Image: UZU

RIDING THE KUROSHIO with SOFTBANK

BY PAUL ASHTON





SoftBank's history unfolds like an ambitious narrative of transformation, vision, and relentless pursuit of innovation, punctuated by moments of both audacious triumph and humbling setbacks. It's a story that is deeply intertwined with its founder, Masayoshi Son, whose unshakeable belief in the power of technology has propelled the company from a small software distributor in Japan to a global powerhouse reshaping the future of technology and investment.

The beginnings of SoftBank in 1981 are the stuff of entrepreneurial legend. Masayoshi Son, an immigrant's son with an appetite for risk, saw the potential in software long before most others. At a time when computers were still curiosities for many, he boldly declared that the company would be a cornerstone of what he called the Information Revolution. In an early interview, Son reflected on his vision, saying, "I wanted to build something timeless, something that would touch the lives of millions." The name SoftBank itself, suggesting a repository of software wealth, carried a certain poetry that hinted at the lofty goals of its founder.

From the outset, SoftBank did more than just distribute software, it cultivated an ecosystem. Its foray into tech magazines, such as Oh! PC, was not just a business move but a strategic play to build a community of early adopters and enthusiasts who would shape the Japanese tech narrative. Son seemed to have an innate sense of where the world was headed, a quality that would define his career.

**"FROM THE OUTSET, SOFTBANK DID MORE THAN JUST
DISTRIBUTE SOFTWARE, IT CULTIVATED AN ECOSYSTEM."**



By the 1990s, SoftBank was positioning itself on the global stage. Son's investment in Yahoo! Inc. in 1995 wasn't merely opportunistic—it was prescient. He saw the internet's future when many were still grappling with its present. Yahoo Japan became not just a profit center but a cultural touchstone in Japan's internet age. These moves weren't without risk. The dot-com crash of the early 2000s wiped out billions in value from SoftBank's portfolio, but Son's conviction in the internet's transformative power never wavered. "I told myself, this is temporary," he once said of the crash. "The revolution is just beginning."

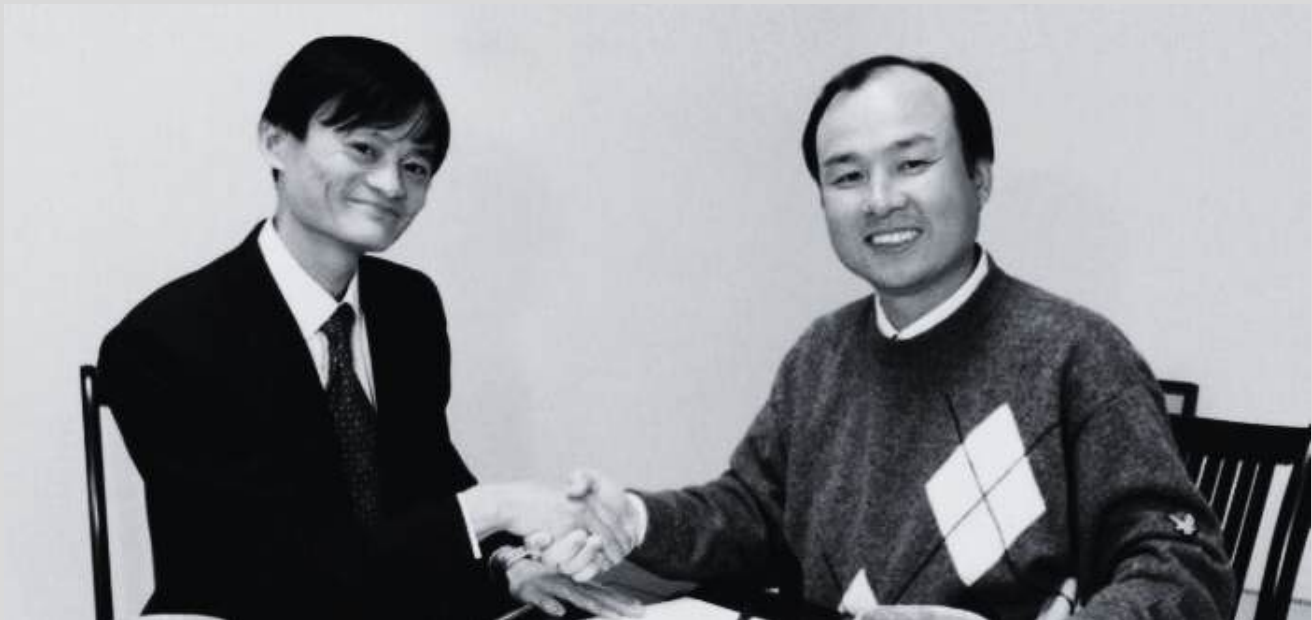
It was during this period of recovery that Son made what is perhaps the single greatest investment in venture capital history: Alibaba. In 2000, SoftBank injected \$20 million into the fledgling Chinese e-commerce platform, a company Son described at the time as having "a founder who had the fire." Jack Ma, Alibaba's charismatic leader, and Son developed an enduring partnership. When Alibaba went public in 2014, the investment turned into a staggering \$50 billion. The windfall wasn't just a financial boon, it was validation of Son's ability to see potential where others hesitated.

Even as SoftBank's internet investments flourished, Son was already pivoting. In 2006, SoftBank acquired Vodafone Japan, rebranding it as SoftBank Mobile. It was a risky \$15 billion gamble on a struggling mobile carrier, but it paid off spectacularly. Securing exclusive rights to Apple's iPhone in Japan catapulted the company to the forefront of the mobile revolution. Son's foresight here wasn't merely about technology; it was about understanding how a single device could redefine human connectivity.



“WHEN ALIBABA WENT PUBLIC IN 2014, THE INVESTMENT TURNED INTO A STAGGERING \$50 BILLION.”





The late 2000s also marked SoftBank's increasing interest in renewable energy, a move that many saw as a departure from its tech roots but which Son framed as a logical extension of his vision. "Energy," he remarked in 2011 after the Fukushima disaster, "is the backbone of everything we do. It must be sustainable." This philosophy underscored SoftBank's launch of SB Energy and its investments in solar power projects, positioning the company as a thought leader in corporate sustainability.

By the 2010s, Son was thinking bigger, much bigger. The SoftBank Vision Fund, launched in 2017, was a statement of intent. With \$100 billion in backing, including major contributions from Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund, the Vision Fund became the largest tech investment fund in history. It was a bet not just on companies but on the very concept of artificial intelligence as the driving force of the next industrial revolution. Son likened AI to electricity in its potential to redefine society, and his investments spanned a diverse array of sectors, from autonomous vehicles to biotech.

The Vision Fund wasn't without its controversies. High-profile missteps, like the WeWork debacle, raised eyebrows about SoftBank's due diligence and investment strategy. The company poured billions into WeWork, only to see the co-working giant implode before its IPO. Critics pointed to Son's unyielding optimism as a liability, but he stood firm, acknowledging mistakes while reiterating his belief in the long-term vision. "Sometimes you fail," he remarked candidly, "but failure is just a step toward something greater."

"SON LIKENED AI TO ELECTRICITY IN ITS POTENTIAL TO REDEFINE SOCIETY."





What makes SoftBank's journey so compelling is not just the scale of its achievements but the contradictions it embodies. On the one hand, it's a story of meticulous strategy, investing early in Yahoo!, Alibaba, and mobile networks; on the other, it's one of reckless ambition, exemplified by overreaching bets on companies like WeWork and Katera. These contradictions reflect Son himself: a man whose optimism is as boundless as his risk tolerance. He doesn't merely invest in companies; he invests in narratives, narratives about the future, about what humanity can achieve when technology and imagination converge.

Today, SoftBank's gaze is firmly fixed on artificial intelligence. Son has repeatedly spoken of a future dominated by artificial superintelligence (ASI), predicting that machines will surpass human intelligence within a matter of decades. "This isn't a question of if," he told shareholders recently. "It's a question of when." His acquisition of Arm Holdings in 2016 was a strategic move toward this future, as Arm's chip designs power much of the world's AI infrastructure. SoftBank is now positioning itself not just as a participant in the AI revolution but as one of its architects.

SoftBank's story, driven by Masayoshi Son's audacious vision and unyielding belief in technology's transformative power, remains a work in progress. Rooted in the realities of its business, the company has strategically expanded into emerging markets like India and Southeast Asia, backing ventures such as Paytm and Grab to secure its influence in the fastest-growing digital economies. At its core, SoftBank embodies a dream of a world connected by networks, powered by AI, and shaped by bold ideas, ensuring its legacy endures as the Information Revolution continues to unfold.

"HE DOESN'T MERELY INVEST IN COMPANIES; HE INVESTS IN NARRATIVES, NARRATIVES ABOUT THE FUTURE."





Image: Miyagino Stable

NOKOTTA, NOKOTTA, NOKOTTA.

BY PAUL ASHTON



What is your earliest memory of watching sumo? It's an oddly specific thing to remember, especially if you weren't raised in Japan. For many of us growing up in the late 1980s and early 90s, it came to us unexpectedly through Trans World Sport. Two or three glorious minutes every Saturday morning, squeezed between segments on Aussie Rules or the Dakar Rally, brought sumo into our living rooms like some otherworldly spectacle. The matches were lightning-fast, brutal, and raw, and these hulking men smashed into each other with an intensity that even made my favourite sport, rugby, look tame. There are no punches or kicks, just pure force, technique, and bucketloads of ceremony.

I was mesmerised by names like Chiyonofuji, Hokutoumi, Kotonishiki, and Akebono, the Hawaiian giant who would become the first foreign-born yokozuna. Watching from afar, sumo seemed timeless, as if in Japan, this titanic drama unfolded in sacred rings across the country on the daily. I didn't understand the rules, and I certainly didn't know the culture, but I knew one thing: sumo was magnetic. It felt ancient and mythical, yet incredibly visceral and real.

Fast forward thirty years, and here I am, living in Japan, still hooked on the sport that once captivated me as a teenager. I've spent two decades following tournaments, witnessing the rise and dominance of rikishi like Hakuho, Asashoryu, and Kisenosato, and even meeting my favourite wrestler of all time, Hakuho —then Master Miyagino, in a nightclub in Ginza (a story for another time perhaps). I've watched former legends transition into stablemasters, training the next generation of sumo warriors. But for all the sport's enduring beauty, there are signs of deep trouble. Sumo, despite its towering cultural presence, is struggling. If the Japan Sumo Association (JSA) doesn't evolve and adapt, the sacred dohyo risks becoming a relic of the past rather than a stage for the future.



“I DIDN'T UNDERSTAND THE RULES, AND I CERTAINLY DIDN'T KNOW THE CULTURE, BUT I KNEW ONE THING: SUMO WAS MAGNETIC.”





The warning signs are clear. In 2024, professional sumo's roster fell below 600 active wrestlers for the first time in 45 years. Compare that to the Waka-Taka Boom of the 1990s, when more than 900 rikishi competed, driven by the charisma and rivalry of the Takanohana and Wakanohana brothers. At its peak in 1994, sumo boasted 943 professional wrestlers, which now feels unattainable. Today, young Japanese men are turning away from sumo in alarming numbers. The reasons are numerous: the sport's brutal training regimen, hazing scandals, and the knowledge that only those in the top two divisions get paid a livable salary. The rest grind it out on allowances that wouldn't even cover a week's groceries. Japan's shrinking birthrate only compounds the problem, shrinking the already limited pool of homegrown talent.

And yet, amid this existential crisis, there is hope, and it's coming from an unlikely place: YouTube. Yes, the digital age has finally entered sumo's ancient halls. Forward-thinking stablemasters are embracing fly-on-the-wall long-form YouTube videos, giving fans unprecedented access to the day-to-day lives of sumo wrestlers, warts and all. These channels are a revelation. My personal favourite is Futagoyama Stable's channel, "Sumo food - Sumo wrestler's daily life", which feels like a sumo documentary brought to life. There's no filter. Viewers see everything. Morning keiko (practice), sweat-drenched and unrelenting. Massive vats of chanko-nabe bubbling away, prepared by wrestlers as part of their daily duties. Then, of course, the most enticing part is the wrestlers eating huge bowls of varying foods with smiles, slurps and reactions that feel like each meal is the first time they have encountered sustenance of this type.

"TODAY, YOUNG JAPANESE MEN ARE TURNING AWAY FROM SUMO IN ALARMING NUMBERS."



The magic of these channels is their humanity. They demystify the sport. You see young wrestlers pushing themselves to the brink in practice but also laughing, eating, and supporting each other like brothers. For the unsalaried rikishi in the lower ranks, these channels build fanbases that translate into real support, financially and emotionally. It's working. Futagoyama Stable recently attracted a promising 15-year-old recruit who converted from rugby to sumo after becoming a fan through their channel. That's no small feat in a country where rugby, fueled by Japan's World Cup success, is on the rise.

The success of YouTube outreach proves something important: the sport doesn't need to abandon its traditions to embrace change. Instead, sumo can use modern tools to highlight what makes it so unique. The JSA should look at this as a model for something bigger, a global branding strategy to put sumo on the world stage. For too long, the JSA has clung to an outdated broadcasting deal with NHK, Japan's national broadcaster, which pays only ¥30 billion annually (roughly \$20 million), and generates an additional paltry \$20 million USD in revenue on top of that annually. That's embarrassingly low for a sport with potentially global appeal. Major League Baseball, by contrast, generates over \$11.34 billion, with around \$1.5 billion by way of global broadcast rights.

Imagine a world where sumo matches are broadcast live on platforms like DAZN or Amazon Prime, complete with translated commentary and immersive storytelling. Pay-per-view options for major tournaments could generate millions more. High-stakes bouts featuring yokozuna could become global events, drawing viewers from Los



“IMAGINE A WORLD WHERE SUMO MATCHES ARE BROADCAST LIVE ON PLATFORMS LIKE DAZN OR AMAZON PRIME.”





Angeles to London to São Paulo. With real money on the table, salaries for wrestlers would skyrocket. Picture a yokozuna making \$20 million a year, not an unattainable fantasy, but a reflection of the sport's global potential. When the world's strongest athletes see sumo as a legitimate, lucrative career, the talent pool would have the chance to grow.

However, for sumo to succeed globally, it must address its darker truths. The JSA's governance remains opaque, and its leadership is entrenched in old ways. Reformers, like former yokozuna Takanohana, who dared to challenge the system, are pushed out instead of embraced. Scandals, be it hazing, corruption, or match-fixing, have been swept under the proverbial tatami. Fans, particularly global ones, won't tolerate this kind of opacity. The JSA must adopt the transparency and professionalism of leagues like the NBA or FIFA, where governance reforms have salvaged reputations and turned scandals into opportunities for progress.

And while we're talking about uncomfortable topics, let's address gambling. Sumo's history with illegal gambling, complete with its underworld connections to the yakuza, is a stain on its legacy. Gambling in Japan remains illegal, except for a few regulated markets like horse racing and boat racing. But here's the awkward truth: sumo is perfectly suited for legal, regulated betting. Matches are fast, binary (win or lose), and packed with suspense. Although maybe a extremely long-shot, properly managed, sports betting in countries where gambling on sports is legal, could potentially generate enormous revenue for the JSA, funding grassroots programs, scholarships for

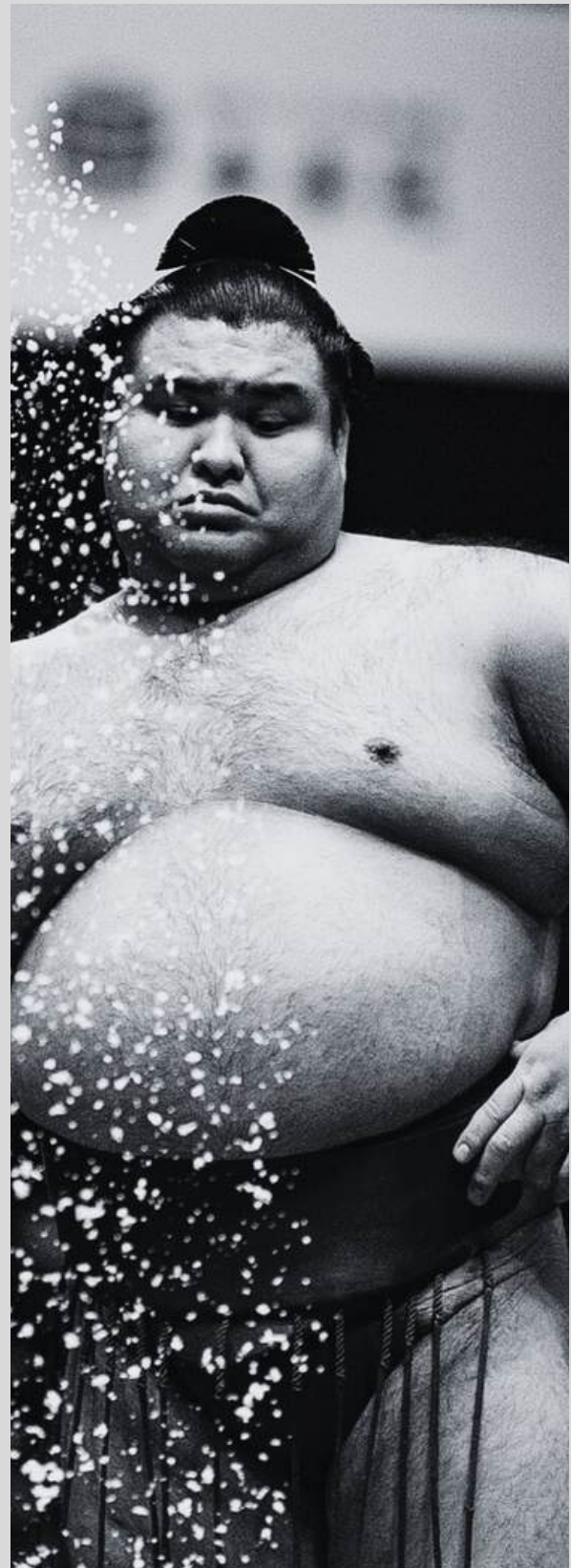
“FOR SUMO TO SUCCEED GLOBALLY, IT MUST ADDRESS ITS DARKER TRUTHS.”



young recruits, and better salaries for wrestlers. Official legalised gambling, similar to the “toto” system employed by the J.League in Japan, and regulated by the government, might also help remove the criminal undertones that have haunted the sport for decades. By replacing secrecy with oversight and trust, this change might allow for significant funding at the growth of grassroots sumo throughout the country while helping to enable sumo preservation as a cultural asset and building public welfare programs to help sumo gain more popularity in Japan.

Sumo is at a crossroads. It can cling to its shrinking domestic audience, suffocated by outdated traditions, or it can rise to meet its global potential. The sport’s drama, beauty, and humanity are already there, YouTube channels like the one from Futagoyama Stable are proof of how powerful sumo can be when it opens its doors. The JSA must build on this momentum. Broadcast matches to the world, attract global talent, build the grassroots of the sport, and reform the systems that hold sumo back.

Echoed in the gyōji cries of “Nokotta, nokotta, nokotta!” during a match when a wrestler teeters on the brink of defeat, this is also a rallying cry and a call to fight for the future of this unique cultural sport. The Japan Sumo Association must take this cry to heart. It should be their war cry, their declaration that sumo is not yet beaten. The sport can, and must, grow, adapt, and prepare for the next thousand years. The future is within reach, and I for one would love to see sumo step back into the fight for real.



“BY REPLACING SECRECY WITH OVERSIGHT AND TRUST, THIS CHANGE MIGHT ALLOW FOR SIGNIFICANT FUNDING.”





Image: Reuters

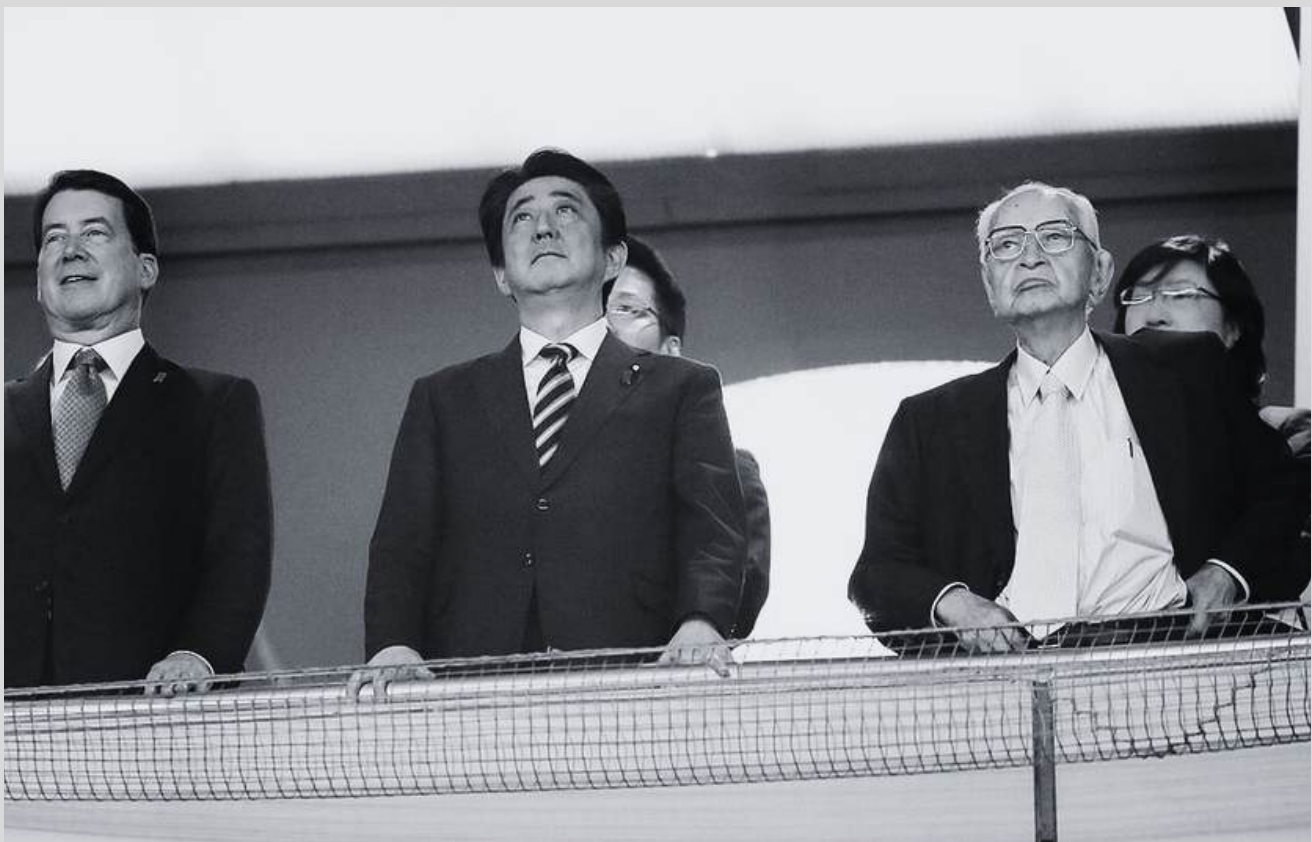
WHO THE HELL WAS TSUNEO WATANABE?

BY PAUL ASHTON



Tsuneo Watanabe, who died on December 19, 2024, at the age of 98, was far more than the man who helmed The Yomiuri Shimbun, the world's largest newspaper. He was a towering figure in Japan's political and cultural landscape, a press baron who wielded influence with a deftness and audacity that shaped the nation's post-war trajectory. His career spanned seven tumultuous decades, during which he rose from an ambitious political journalist to the undisputed kingmaker of Japanese politics. For better or worse, Watanabe's story is inseparable from modern Japan's own.

Born in 1926, in a Tokyo on the precipice of transformation, Watanabe's early life unfolded against the backdrop of a militarising Japan. As a young student, he displayed a contrarian streak, openly challenging the militaristic orthodoxy that engulfed the nation. Drafted into the Imperial Japanese Army during the twilight of World War II, he endured beatings and abuse from superiors—an experience that left him with a lifelong loathing for Japan's wartime hierarchy. His disdain extended to the glorification of kamikaze pilots, whom he described with visceral clarity as “sheep at a slaughterhouse.” These formative years instilled in Watanabe a profound scepticism toward authoritarian structures, even as his career would see him build and dominate a hierarchy of his own.



“HE ROSE FROM AN AMBITIOUS POLITICAL JOURNALIST TO THE UNDISPUTED KINGMAKER OF JAPANESE POLITICS.”





After the war, Watanabe entered Tokyo University, where he briefly joined the Japanese Communist Party. His flirtation with Marxism, however, was short-lived; he found the party's dogmatic rigidity stifling and left disillusioned. This ideological pivot marked the beginning of his transition toward conservatism—a shift that would come to define his journalistic and political career. By 1950, Watanabe had joined The Yomiuri Shimbun, where he quickly established himself as a political journalist of rare insight and relentless ambition.

Watanabe's rise at Yomiuri was meteoric. By the 1970s, he was not just reporting on Japan's political elite but ingratiating himself within it. He became a trusted confidant to several prime ministers, most notably Yasuhiro Nakasone, with whom he shared a relationship that blurred the lines between journalism and political strategy. Together, they crafted policies and narratives that would shape Japan's conservative agenda for decades. It was through these relationships that Watanabe honed his role as a kingmaker, leveraging his journalistic platform to set political agendas, sway elections, and promote constitutional reform.

When Watanabe became editor-in-chief of Yomiuri in 1991, he was already a formidable presence in Japanese media. Under his stewardship, the paper reached its zenith, with a daily circulation exceeding 10 million copies—a feat unmatched in the annals of print journalism. But for Watanabe, the sheer reach of Yomiuri was more than a commercial triumph; it was a lever of political power. "Political parties are in my hands," he once boasted. This was not an idle claim. Watanabe's Yomiuri routinely shaped public

“BY THE 1970S, HE WAS NOT JUST REPORTING ON JAPAN’S POLITICAL ELITE BUT INGRATIATING HIMSELF WITHIN IT.”



opinion, influenced policy debates, and exerted pressure on political leaders. Tax reforms, economic policies, and even Japan's debates over constitutional revision bore the unmistakable imprint of Yomiuri's editorials.

Yet Watanabe's legacy is not merely one of editorial prowess. He presided over Yomiuri during an era when the media wielded unparalleled influence in shaping public discourse. His transformation of the paper into a conservative bastion aligned with Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), raising questions about the ethical boundaries between journalism and political partisanship. Critics accused him of turning Yomiuri into a mouthpiece for conservative ideology, particularly on issues such as constitutional reform and Japan's military posture. Watanabe's unwavering support for revising Japan's pacifist Article 9 stood in stark contrast to his personal abhorrence of Japan's wartime legacy—a contradiction that encapsulated the complexity of his politics.

His relationship with power was multifaceted. Watanabe was both a critic and a collaborator, unafraid to challenge authority when it suited his purposes. He opposed visits by Japanese leaders to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine, denouncing the glorification of war criminals enshrined there. He famously described Japan's wartime leaders as "criminals" who had recklessly squandered lives. At the same time, he cultivated alliances with powerbrokers across the political spectrum, embedding himself so deeply within the machinery of governance that his role often transcended that of a mere observer. He was not just covering the story—he was writing it.



“CRITICS ACCUSED HIM OF TURNING YOMIURI INTO A MOUTHPIECE FOR CONSERVATIVE IDEOLOGY.”





As the de facto owner of the Yomiuri Giants, Watanabe extended his influence into the cultural sphere, albeit with mixed results. His stewardship of the team was marked by both triumphs and controversies. Notoriously indifferent to baseball itself, Watanabe approached the sport as a business and a tool for enhancing Yomiuri's brand. His 2004 remark dismissing players as "mere players" sparked a national outcry and underscored the growing chasm between his corporate pragmatism and the emotional investment of fans. Yet, under his leadership, the Giants remained Japan's most iconic team, a testament to his managerial acumen despite his personal disinterest.

Watanabe's influence was not confined to Japan's borders. As head of Yomiuri's Washington bureau during the 1960s, he cultivated an understanding of international politics that informed his later editorial stance. He recognised the strategic importance of Japan's alliance with the United States and used Yomiuri to advocate for policies that strengthened this relationship. His editorials often reflected a nuanced grasp of geopolitics, urging Japan to adapt to a rapidly changing global landscape while maintaining its economic and cultural sovereignty.

In his later years, Watanabe's grip on power remained undiminished. Even as print media's influence waned in the digital age, he continued to shape Yomiuri's editorial direction and maintain his relationships with political leaders. His longevity in a field defined by transient alliances and shifting loyalties was a testament to his adaptability

"NOTORIOUSLY INDIFFERENT TO BASEBALL ITSELF, WATANABE APPROACHED THE SPORT AS A BUSINESS AND A TOOL FOR ENHANCING YOMIURI'S BRAND."





and tenacity. Yet, his autocratic leadership style drew criticism. Former colleagues described a newsroom where dissent was stifled, and editorial independence was subordinated to Watanabe's vision. He relished his reputation as a "last dictator" in journalism, embodying a model of press baronry that felt increasingly anachronistic in the 21st century.

Watanabe's death marks the end of an era in Japanese journalism and politics. His passing invites reflection on the role of media in shaping democracy, the ethics of influence, and the delicate balance between power and accountability. In many ways, Watanabe was a product of his time—a post-war Japan rebuilding its identity and institutions. Yet he was also a shaper of that time, a man whose ambitions and contradictions mirrored the nation's own struggles with modernity and tradition.

His legacy is a mosaic of triumphs and controversies. As a journalist, he was unparalleled in his ability to penetrate the corridors of power and illuminate the mechanisms of governance. As a media mogul, he built an empire that set the standard for influence and reach. And as a political actor, he left an indelible mark on Japan's conservative movement. Whether remembered as a visionary or a manipulator, Tsuneo Watanabe remains a symbol of the complex interplay between media, politics, and power in modern Japan. His story is not just the story of a man but of a nation grappling with its place in history and the world.

"HE WAS A SHAPER OF THAT TIME, A MAN WHOSE AMBITIONS AND CONTRADICTIONS MIRRORED THE NATION'S OWN STRUGGLES WITH MODERNITY AND TRADITION."





Image: Reservoir Dogs

MR. PINK WAS ONTO SOMETHING

BY PAUL ASHTON



Ever stood at a counter, card in hand, as a screen flashes 15%, 18%, 25%? It's not a choice; it's a test of your humanity, or so it feels. Declining a tip while the barista or cashier stands watch can feel like swatting a puppy, even when it defies logic. Self-checkout machines, kiosks, even hotel booking sites now demand tribute. What started as a gesture of gratitude in the West has mutated into a guilt-laden tax.

During a trip to Los Angeles, I experienced this tipping quagmire firsthand. A good friend introduced me to Blue Bottle Coffee, a niche alternative to Starbucks known for brewing coffee "the old-fashioned way", by hand, not the push of a button. It sounded promising, a haven for coffee purists. But when it came time to pay, I was confronted with a guilt-inducing tipping screen, the kind of thing I had never encountered in Japan.

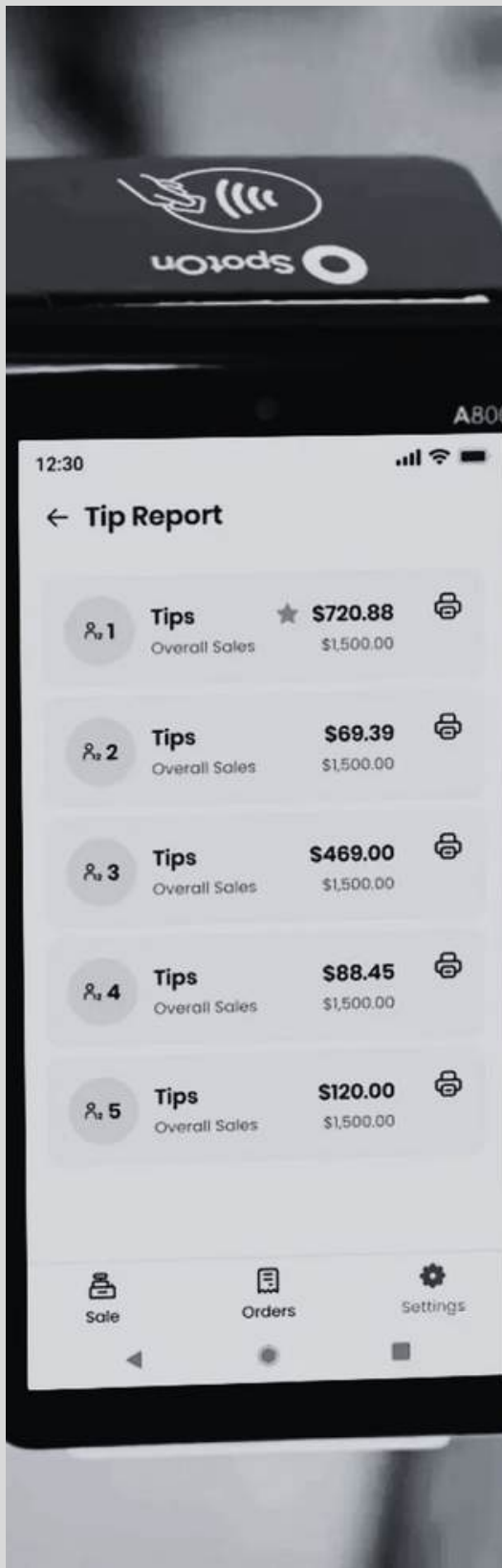
The cashier stood there, waiting, as if my decision were part of the transaction itself. My friend glanced over my shoulder as I pressed "No tip," his disapproval hanging in the air. He couldn't understand my choice, but I couldn't understand the expectation. Why tip someone for simply taking my order? In Japan, such a notion would be absurd; excellent service is the baseline, not an exception that warrants extra pay.

If my visits had been frequent enough to warrant recognition, my coffee ready before I ordered, my chocolate croissant handed over without me asking, then maybe a tip might have felt natural, a reward for going above and beyond. But here, tipping wasn't tied to exceptional effort; it was a reflexive demand, a default surcharge for doing a job. And that, really, is the crux of the issue with tipping in the West.



"IN JAPAN, SUCH A NOTION WOULD BE ABSURD; EXCELLENT SERVICE IS THE BASELINE, NOT AN EXCEPTION THAT WARRANTS EXTRA PAY."





This sentiment has been immortalized in pop culture, particularly in Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs*. In a now-iconic breakfast scene, Mr. Pink (played by Steve Buscemi) unleashes a no-holds-barred critique of tipping culture.

Mr. Pink: "I don't tip because society says I have to. All right? I mean, I'll tip if somebody really deserves a tip, if they really put forth the effort. But tipping automatically? It's for the birds. I mean, as far as I'm concerned, they're just doing their job."

The conversation escalates when Mr. Pink points out the arbitrary nature of tipping:

"So is working at McDonald's, but you don't feel the need to tip them, do you? Why not? They're serving you food. But society says, 'Don't tip these guys over here; tip these guys over here.' That's bullshit!"

It's an uncomfortable truth: tipping in the West has less to do with gratitude and more to do with navigating social pressure. As Mr. Pink continues his argument, it becomes clear that tipping has devolved into an expectation that unfairly shifts the financial burden of fair wages from businesses to customers.

This isn't to say that service workers don't deserve to earn a living wage, of course they do. But the system itself is broken. Businesses that rely on tips to offset low wages are essentially outsourcing their labor costs to the consumer, without making that cost explicit. It's a sleight of hand, one that allows the real price of goods and services to stay hidden while shifting accountability away from the employer.

"TIPPING IN THE WEST HAS LESS TO DO WITH GRATITUDE AND MORE TO DO WITH NAVIGATING SOCIAL PRESSURE."



Meanwhile, Japan offers a radically different approach. Forget adding a few coins for a taxi driver; in Japan, they'll chase you down to return them. This isn't stinginess; it's a matter of pride. Tipping disrupts the sanctity of the transaction and insults the ethos of omotenashi, Japan's philosophy of selfless hospitality. Service workers in Japan don't need tips because they're already paid fairly. Their roles are viewed as respectable careers, not disposable gigs. This professional dignity ensures consistent, high-quality service without the psychological toll tipping imposes on workers and customers alike.

Even in rare cases where money changes hands, like kokorozuke in traditional inns, it's done with painstaking formality. Cash is meticulously wrapped, offered with humility, and often refused initially as a gesture of respect. Compare that to awkwardly fumbling for change while a server hovers, and you see why Japan's approach feels like a breath of fresh air.

The psychology behind tipping in the West is another beast altogether. It's not about gratitude, it's about guilt. Digital payment systems amplify this dynamic, making it awkward to opt out. Research shows most customers pick the middle tip option, not because they want to, but because they don't want to look bad. It's a social tax disguised as generosity. Japan sidesteps this mess entirely. Prices are transparent; the price tag is what you pay, no strings attached. Service is consistent because it's driven by professionalism, not the hope of a fat tip. Workers don't need to size you up to guess whether you're a 15-percenter or a zero; they just do their job, and do it exceptionally.



“WHERE MONEY CHANGES HANDS, LIKE KOKOROZUKE IN TRADITIONAL INNS, IT'S DONE WITH PAINSTAKING FORMALITY.”





Japan's no-tip culture isn't just a cultural oddity; it's a roadmap. Exceptional service doesn't require dangling extra cash. Instead, fair wages and pride in work do the heavy lifting. Imagine if Western businesses built tipping into their prices and paid workers what they're worth. It would eliminate the guesswork, guilt, and economic precarity tipping creates.

The situation in the U.S., though, is deeply ingrained. Tipping is part of the social contract, a system that shifts the responsibility for fair wages from employers to customers. Businesses resist change because tipping props up their bottom line, while customers balk at higher upfront costs. Even with a better alternative staring us in the face, like Japan's system of fairness and pride, Western society clings to tipping as though it were sacred.

Tipping has gone from a kind gesture to an unwieldy system that props up inequality and obscures the true cost of services. In Japan, where tipping is almost nonexistent, service shines brighter, free of the transactional haze. Meanwhile, Western tipping culture spirals into absurdity, creeping into every corner of life and demanding ever-higher percentages.

As I reflect on that moment at Blue Bottle Coffee, I'm struck by how much this small act illuminated a larger truth. Tipping in the West is no longer about rewarding effort; it's about navigating an unspoken, guilt-driven social expectation. By contrast, Japan shows us what's possible when service is rooted in dignity, not dependence.

“AS I REFLECT ON THAT MOMENT AT BLUE BOTTLE COFFEE, I’M STRUCK BY HOW MUCH THIS SMALL ACT ILLUMINATED A LARGER TRUTH.”





So as we keep punching “20%” at coffee counters and kiosks, it’s worth asking: who does this really serve? If the answer isn’t the workers, maybe it’s time to rethink the whole system. Japan’s example proves that fair pay and great service don’t need tips to thrive—they need respect. Perhaps that’s what’s truly missing: a culture that values service workers for their professionalism, not their ability to coax a few extra dollars from your pocket.

If Mr. Pink were here, he’d be the first to point out that tipping has lost its original intent. In the West, it’s become less of a reward and more of an obligation—a tangled web of guilt, expectation, and outdated traditions. And maybe, just maybe, we could all learn a thing or two from his unapologetic stance.

**“IF THE ANSWER ISN’T THE WORKERS, MAYBE IT’S TIME TO
RETHINK THE WHOLE SYSTEM.”**





Image: Flickr

THE LAST TRAIN TO TRANSCENTRAL

BY PAUL ASHTON





Culture shock has many forms, but few hit harder than public transport. It's not just about the trains or stations; it's about the unwritten laws of how people move, cooperate, or don't. Enter Tokyo Metro managers, tasked with taming London's Elizabeth Line: a sleek new rail artery tangled in the Gordian knot of British transport dysfunction. Their mission? Bring the rigor of Japanese efficiency to the chaos of TfL. Their challenge? London isn't just a transport system; it's a social experiment in managed dysfunction.

The Elizabeth Line, running from Paddington in the west to Abbey Wood in the east, is a gleaming symbol of what British public transport could be. Mostly underground but with sections surfacing as it moves eastward, it is a vital link through central London, blending state-of-the-art infrastructure with the city's age-old transport culture. Yet, it represents a frontier of sorts for Tokyo Metro, which recently made waves with a successful IPO and is now, for the first time, stepping beyond its home turf to operate a rail line overseas.

Starting in May 2025, Tokyo Metro will be part of the consortium taking over the Elizabeth Line's operations under a contract that could last up to nine and a half years. This is no slow dip into international waters. The team isn't easing into its global expansion, it's diving headfirst into the shark-infested depths of the London Underground, the oldest subway system in the world and one of the most notoriously complex.

“THIS IS NO SLOW DIP INTO INTERNATIONAL WATERS.”



An ambitious move, but it comes with high stakes. The Elizabeth Line is not just a railway—it's a testing ground for Tokyo Metro's aspirations of global growth, a stage to prove that their brand of precision can thrive beyond Japan's borders. For the first time, the Japanese ethos of meticulous planning and seamless execution will be placed in direct contrast with the scrappy, disjointed culture of British public transport.

It's a clash of worlds that I, perhaps uniquely, have spent far too much time contemplating. Having ridden both London and Tokyo's rail systems extensively, I've experienced their stark contrasts firsthand, sometimes in ways that left an indelible mark on my memory (and occasionally my clothing). These aren't just anecdotes; they're insights into why this cultural experiment is as much about people as it is about trains.

Take, for instance, one of my earliest trips to London as a child. I remember stepping onto the platform, only to be smacked in the face by a roaring gust of wind rushing through the connecting tunnels. This subterranean labyrinth felt alive, the wind a ghostly herald of the train's arrival. I marvelled at it. That childhood wonder turned to adult bemusement years later when I realised this wasn't some intentional engineering marvel, it was the natural byproduct of an ancient, sprawling, poorly ventilated system.



“I’VE EXPERIENCED THEIR STARK CONTRASTS FIRSTHAND, SOMETIMES IN WAYS THAT LEFT AN INDELIBLE MARK ON MY MEMORY.”





Contrast that with Tokyo, where the air underground feels eerily still, as though even the elements themselves have been disciplined into submission. There, infrastructure is so advanced that the system barely announces its presence. The trains simply glide in, leaving you with the unnerving sense that it's not the train but you running late.

Fast forward to 2001, and I was back riding the Tube, this time suited and booted for job interviews after graduating from university. Armed with a portfolio of design work and what I thought was a crisp white shirt, I hopped onto the carriage, leaning briefly against the window to steady myself. By the time I stepped off at my destination, I looked down to discover my shirt had been given an Underground makeover and had turned into zebra print, courtesy of whatever grime the seldom-cleaned window had decided to share with me. London doesn't just test your patience; it has a way of leaving its mark.

This would be unimaginable in Tokyo, where the unwritten contract between the public and the system is one of mutual respect. Stations and carriages gleam with cleanliness, even at peak hours. And it's not because someone is constantly cleaning (by Japanese standards, cleaning the carriage once a day is a bare minimum level of cleaning, so it almost counts as no cleaning); it's because the commuters themselves uphold the standards. Eating on the train? A faux pas. Littering? Practically sacrilege. And leaning on a window? Why would you, need to?

“BY THE TIME I STEPPED OFF AT MY DESTINATION, I LOOKED DOWN TO DISCOVER MY SHIRT HAD BEEN GIVEN AN UNDERGROUND MAKEOVER.”



After being in Japan for a while, I had my first encounter with Tokyo's rush hour commute. I'd heard the stories but was woefully unprepared for the reality: the platform marshals, who I imagine would also fit right in at a sardine canning factory, ramming passengers into carriages like some surreal performance art. I thought the train was already full when I boarded, but within seconds, I found myself compressed into a human jigsaw puzzle. There was no standing room, correction, there was no room, period. Yet somehow, as if by magic (or years of collective expertise), another thirty people were squeezed in after me. Holding onto a dangling strap was unnecessary, I couldn't have fallen over if I tried, pinned in place by the sheer force of the Tokyoite sandwich, I'd become the unwilling filling for.

London's rush hour chaos is a different beast entirely. There's no one to push you into the train; you're left to battle it out yourself, elbows at the ready, passive-aggressive apologies exchanged as you shoulder your way inside. Tokyo's packed trains are a masterclass in collective cooperation, while London's feel like a never-ending skirmish in a commuter civil war.

But this isn't just about packed trains or dirty windows; it's about deeper cultural contrasts. Japanese rail systems function like a symphony, where every note is in harmony. London's, by contrast, are more like jazz, chaotic, improvised, and just barely holding together.



“YOU’RE LEFT TO BATTLE IT OUT YOURSELF, ELBOWS AT THE READY, PASSIVE-AGGRESSIVE APOLOGIES EXCHANGED AS YOU SHOULDER YOUR WAY INSIDE.”



In Tokyo, the public-private interplay is astonishingly complex yet functional. Suburban trains might transition seamlessly on the same tracks, from private railways to Tokyo Metro lines, back to another private operator, all without a hitch. Disputes are rare, and cooperation is expected. London? A single late freight train can ripple across the network like a poorly executed domino effect, triggering hours of costly “delay attribution” bureaucracy. Operators and agencies, TfL, Network Rail, and private firms, are less partners than adversaries, squabbling over responsibilities like contestants on *The Weakest Link*.

Even at the individual level, Tokyo reflects an ethos of trust and discipline. The barriers are often open, assuming passengers will pay their fare. And they do, fare dodging is almost unheard of. In London, barriers aren't just a necessity, they're battlegrounds. From ticket hoppers to tech-savvy fraudsters, the system spends as much time enforcing rules as it does running trains.

And this brings us to the Elizabeth Line, the jewel of London's transport crown, or, at least, it's meant to be. Sleek, modern, and (mostly) punctual, it hints at what public transport in Britain could be. Yet it's still entangled in the labyrinthine web of TfL, Network Rail, and private operators, each with their own agendas. Tokyo Metro managers may marvel at its design and architectural ambition, but they'll despair at the operational disunity. The Elizabeth Line looks like it belongs in Tokyo; it runs like it belongs in London.



“SLEEK, MODERN, AND (MOSTLY) PUNCTUAL, IT HINTS AT WHAT PUBLIC TRANSPORT IN BRITAIN COULD BE.”





For all their technical expertise, Tokyo Metro's managers face a challenge far greater than late trains or overcrowding: London's culture. Japanese systems thrive on collective harmony; London's operate on individual hustle. There's always another train in Tokyo, so passengers don't hold the doors. In London, door-holding isn't just common, it's practically a national sport, combining impatience with misplaced altruism.

If Tokyo Metro's managers succeed, it won't just be because they solved technical issues. It'll be because they managed to instill a slice of Japan's collective ethos into the heart of a city that secretly thrives on chaos. The real question isn't whether the Japanese will survive London, but whether Londoners can adapt to them.

In the end, public transport isn't just about moving people, it's a mirror of the societies it serves. Japan's trains reflect a culture of precision, trust, and quiet discipline. London's reflect a culture that's scrappy, loud, and (somehow) functional despite itself.

Will Japanese precision survive the chaos of TfL? Maybe. But here's the unvarnished truth: even if it does, Londoners will find a way to drag it back down to their level. Because chaos isn't a bug in the system, it is the system. And honestly, Londoners wouldn't have it any other way.

"JAPAN'S TRAINS REFLECT A CULTURE OF PRECISION, TRUST, AND QUIET DISCIPLINE. LONDON'S REFLECT A CULTURE THAT'S SCRAPPY, LOUD, AND (SOMEHOW) FUNCTIONAL DESPITE ITSELF."





Image: Robert Whiting's Substack

NOW READ THIS! TOKYO UNDERWORLD

BY PAUL ASHTON



Some books take you on a journey; others rip the floor out from under you, leaving you in free fall. *Tokyo Underworld: The Fast Times and Hard Life of an American Gangster in Japan* by Robert Whiting does both, and then lights the wreckage on fire for good measure. If you've ever nursed a dreamy, postcard-perfect notion of Japan as a land of cherry blossoms, Zen gardens, and impeccable politeness, this book is here to slap you awake. What lies beneath is a labyrinth of ambition, desperation, and power games, every bit as intricate as a Kyoto tea ceremony but far more cutthroat.

Whiting doesn't just tell a story; he digs into the marrow of post-war Japan, peeling back the layers of its rapid transformation from bombed-out ruin to global powerhouse. At the dark heart of it all is Nick Zappetti, a rogue so flamboyant and audacious that if he didn't exist, you'd think Whiting made him up. The ex-GI turned black-market hustler, pizzeria mogul, and underworld fixer is a perfect lens through which to view Japan's shadowy dance of reinvention. Through Zappetti, Whiting masterfully sketches a portrait of a country where survival often outweighed honor, and where foreign interlopers occasionally thrived despite being outsiders in every sense of the word.

But don't mistake this for another "stranger in a strange land" story. Whiting's genius lies in how he connects the personal to the national, making Zappetti's escapades emblematic of Japan's larger post-war trajectory. Every hustle, every deal, every betrayal reflects the nation's own hustle to claw its way back to prominence. Whiting exposes the transactional nature of this rise, where morality and law often buckled under the weight of necessity.

"A LABYRINTH OF AMBITION, DESPERATION, AND POWER GAMES, EVERY BIT AS INTRICATE AS A KYOTO TEA CEREMONY BUT FAR MORE CUTTHROAT."



Among the book's many standout episodes, the Imperial Hotel diamond heist gleams like the loot at its center. The scene unfolds like a noir fever dream, shady characters, high stakes, and enough double-crossing to make your head spin. But what makes this heist unforgettable isn't just the drama (though it could easily fuel a Netflix series). It's the symbolic weight it carries. This wasn't just a flashy crime; it was a distilled moment of post-war Japan in flux, a place where lawlessness and opportunity collided in the shadow of reconstruction.

It's hard not to admire the sheer nerve of the players involved, even as you're shaking your head at the chaos. This is Whiting's skill, he makes you complicit, drawing you into a world where survival isn't about right or wrong but about playing the angles. And in a Japan emerging from the ashes, the angles were everywhere.



Then there's Nicola's, Zappetti's iconic pizzeria and the improbable epicenter of a Tokyo social ecosystem that bridged gangsters and government officials. Nicola's wasn't just a restaurant; it was a statement—a gaijin planting his flag in a notoriously insular culture. But Whiting doesn't romanticize Zappetti's entrepreneurial flair. Sure, Nicola's was a symbol of adaptability and resilience, but it was also a front-row seat to the compromises required to succeed in a society where appearances masked a network of unspoken rules.

“THE SCENE UNFOLDS LIKE A NOIR FEVER DREAM, SHADY CHARACTERS, HIGH STAKES, AND ENOUGH DOUBLE-CROSSING TO MAKE YOUR HEAD SPIN.”



As Nicola's thrived, so too did its ties to the yakuza, Japan's version of organized chaos. The pizzeria became a living metaphor for Zappetti's life—equal parts brilliance and recklessness, ambition and downfall. Whiting lays this out without judgment, letting the tangled web speak for itself. Zappetti wasn't a hero or a villain; he was a man who saw the cracks in the system and exploited them until the system cracked back.

What makes Tokyo Underworld a must-read isn't just its fascinating characters or its meticulously researched history. It's the way Whiting shatters the romanticized image of Japan without descending into cynicism. This isn't a hit piece; it's a reality check. The Japan of Whiting's narrative is messy, contradictory, and utterly human, a place where power isn't just held but brokered, where resilience is often born out of moral compromise.

For anyone who has ever been charmed by Japan's carefully curated image of order and tradition, this book is both a revelation and a challenge. Whiting invites readers to grapple with the complexities of a nation that rebuilt itself not just through innovation and perseverance but through deals struck in the shadows.

Years after reading it, Tokyo Underworld still lingers—not just as a book but as a lens through which to view Japan and, frankly, the world. Whiting's writing is sharp, cinematic, and unflinching. He doesn't tidy up the narrative with neat moral conclusions because real life, and real power, rarely offer that luxury.



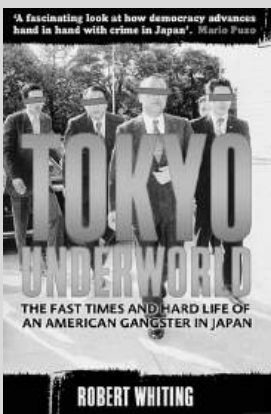
“FOR ANYONE WHO HAS EVER BEEN CHARMED BY JAPAN’S CAREFULLY CURATED IMAGE OF ORDER AND TRADITION, THIS BOOK IS BOTH A REVELATION AND A CHALLENGE.”





Whether you're strolling through Ginza's glittering streets or sipping overpriced whiskey in Roppongi, the book leaves you haunted by the knowledge that beneath every polished surface lies a history of compromise and struggle. That's the genius of *Tokyo Underworld*. It doesn't just tell you a story; it changes how you see the stories all around you.

So, if you're looking for a sanitized tale of honor and tradition, look elsewhere. But if you're ready to dive into the grit and grind of post-war Japan, and to meet the rogues, hustlers, and visionaries who shaped it, this book will not just entertain you—it will rewire how you see the world. Just don't be surprised if it ruins your next trip to Tokyo. You'll never look at the city the same way again.



- Title: *Tokyo Underworld: The Fast Times and Hard Life of an American Gangster in Japan*
- Author: Robert Whiting
- Genre: Narrative nonfiction
- Subject: True Crime, Cultural and Historical Analysis
- Publisher: Little, Brown Book Group
- Publication Date: June 2012
- Summary: *Tokyo Underworld* unveils post-war Japan's gritty underside, following GI-turned-gangster Nick Zappetti through crime and corruption, revealing the alliances behind Japan's rise from ruins to economic power.

“IF YOU’RE LOOKING FOR A SANITIZED TALE OF HONOR AND TRADITION, LOOK ELSEWHERE.”





Image: AFP/AFP via Getty Images

JAPAN BUSINESS ETIQUETTE 101 NEMAWASHI

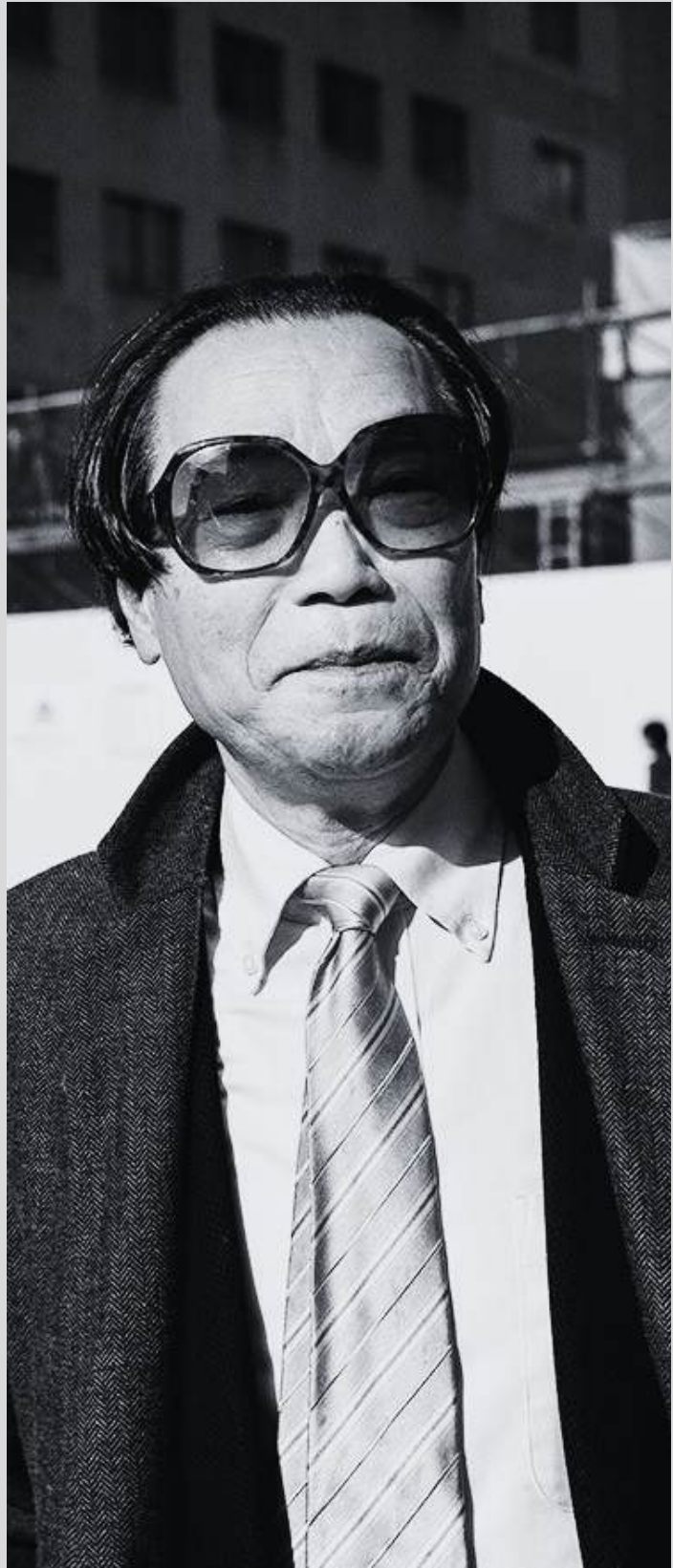
BY PAUL ASHTON



When I first encountered the concept of nemawashi in Japanese business, it felt like an enigma. Meetings, I assumed, were where discussions happened, ideas were debated, and decisions were made. Yet, in Japan, it became apparent that the meeting room was merely a stage where the actors delivered rehearsed lines. The real decisions had been made long before, in quiet conversations and informal discussions. This process, called nemawashi, is an essential yet often misunderstood cornerstone of Japanese business culture.

Nemawashi, which literally means "preparing the roots," borrows its metaphor from gardening. Just as a gardener carefully prepares the roots of a plant before transplanting it to ensure it thrives, nemawashi involves laying the groundwork for a decision to be smoothly accepted and implemented. It is a process of building consensus behind the scenes, approaching stakeholders individually to gain their input, address concerns, and quietly secure agreement. By the time a proposal is formally presented, it has already been informally approved by everyone who matters.

To understand nemawashi is to understand Japan's deep-rooted emphasis on harmony and group cohesion. In Japanese culture, maintaining wa, or harmony, is paramount. Open disagreements or



"IN JAPANESE CULTURE, MAINTAINING WA, OR HARMONY, IS PARAMOUNT."





confrontations are seen as disruptive and undesirable. Nemawashi provides a way to prevent such conflicts by ensuring that dissenting voices are heard and addressed privately, preserving the group's unity when the decision is made public.

This system is not just cultural; it is also highly practical. By securing consensus in advance, nemawashi reduces the risk of failure and ensures smoother implementation of decisions. Every concern has already been acknowledged and resolved, leaving little room for resistance or second-guessing later. In essence, nemawashi creates decisions that are not only agreed upon but are also well-vetted and supported by all involved.

However, for foreigners trying to navigate Japanese business, nemawashi can be perplexing and even frustrating. It often feels opaque, with much of the critical discussion happening behind closed doors or in casual, unstructured settings. Meetings, which are typically seen as the crux of decision-making in many cultures, become a mere formality. As a result, it can be difficult for outsiders to understand where they stand or how their input is being received.

This system also poses challenges for those accustomed to more direct and rapid decision-making processes. The thoroughness of nemawashi can make Japanese decision-making seem slow, especially to those used to fast-paced business environments. Moreover, the lack of explicit feedback during formal discussions can leave foreigners in the dark about the true status of their proposals.

“FOR FOREIGNERS TRYING TO NAVIGATE JAPANESE BUSINESS, NEMAWASHI CAN BE PERPLEXING AND EVEN FRUSTRATING.”



Yet, once understood, nemawashi can be navigated effectively, even by outsiders. It begins with building relationships. Trust is the currency of nemawashi, and without it, you will struggle to gain traction. Investing time in developing connections with key stakeholders is not just advisable; it is essential. These relationships provide the foundation upon which informal conversations can happen, where ideas are shared, refined, and, ultimately, accepted.

Another critical aspect is adapting your communication style. Directness, often prized in other business cultures, can be counterproductive in Japan. Instead, subtlety and indirectness are key. Proposals should be framed as questions or suggestions, allowing room for others to voice their opinions without feeling cornered. Even when you believe you have the perfect solution, presenting it with humility and openness will make it easier for others to engage with the idea. Finding an internal advocate can also be a game-changer. Having someone within the organization who understands both your goals and the nuances of nemawashi can help you navigate the process more effectively. They can act as a bridge, informally discussing your ideas with other stakeholders and smoothing the path for acceptance.



Finally, patience is essential. Nemawashi is not a quick process, but it is thorough. While it may take time to build consensus, the end result is often worth the effort. Decisions made through nemawashi are more likely to succeed because they are deeply rooted in mutual understanding and agreement. For foreigners doing business in Japan, nemawashi is both a challenge and an opportunity. It may initially feel like a barrier to progress, but it is, in fact, a system designed to ensure stability and harmony. By taking the time to understand and work within this process, you can not only navigate Japanese business more effectively but also build relationships and trust that will serve you far beyond any individual decision.

“PROPOSALS SHOULD BE FRAMED AS QUESTIONS OR SUGGESTIONS, ALLOWING ROOM FOR OTHERS TO VOICE THEIR OPINIONS WITHOUT FEELING CORNERED.”





Arakura Fuji Sengen Shrine, Fujiyoshida

BUSINESS JAPANESE FOR PEOPLE IN A RUSH

BY PAUL ASHTON



Phrase:

検討の余地はありませんか。

(Kentō no yochi wa arimasen ka)

Meaning:

The phrase "検討の余地はありませんか。" translates to "Is there any room for discussion?" This polite expression is often used in professional or formal situations to gently inquire whether a topic is open to further consideration or negotiation.

Usage in Context:

In Japanese communication, politeness and subtlety are key, especially in negotiations or discussions where maintaining harmony is essential. This phrase is a tactful way to express interest in exploring alternatives without being too direct or confrontational. The use of " 検 討 " (kentō, meaning "consideration" or "examination") and " 余 地 " (yochi, meaning "room" or "scope") indicates a thoughtful and respectful tone. It's commonly used in workplace discussions, business negotiations, or diplomatic conversations to suggest flexibility or openness to revisiting a matter.

Example:

Context: During a business meeting, you are discussing a proposed plan with a client, but you wish to explore other options.

Phrase:

検討の余地はありませんか。

Translation:

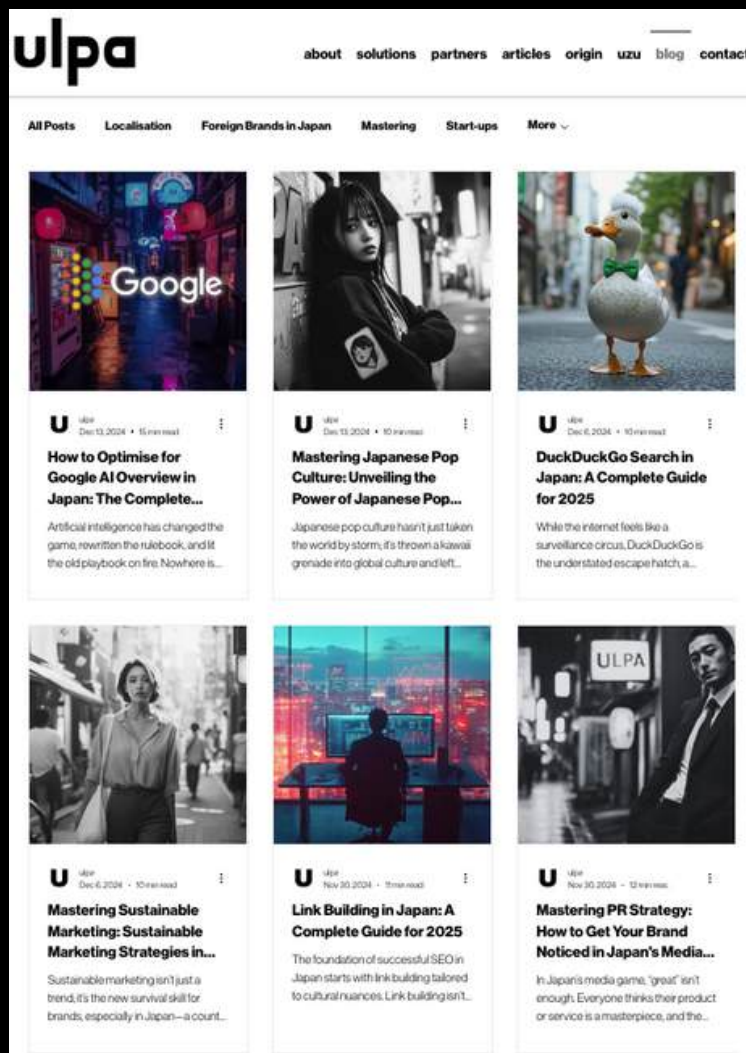
"Is there any room for discussion?"

Cultural Note:

In Japanese culture, it's important to approach discussions and negotiations with respect and tact. By using this phrase, you signal that you are open to dialogue and willing to collaborate while maintaining a polite and professional demeanor. This phrase is particularly valuable in hierarchical settings, as it acknowledges the other party's perspective while introducing the possibility of change or flexibility.



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