UZU

Monthly Review

Be The Center Of The Whirlpool

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THIS ISSUE

FROM THE EDITOR

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Founder
ULPA

Welcome to UZU Issue Number 8, and happy March! As spring slowly unfurls its colours across Japan, there's a sense of fresh energy in the air—much like the vibrant stories we've gathered for you this month.

In this edition, we dive into narratives that challenge the status quo and spark new ways of thinking. Our "Inside the Whirlpool" interview features Raphael Hodé, co-founder of nowthen, who takes us through his innovative approach to startup design and how he balances tradition with modern disruption.

"Riding the Kuroshio" shifts focus to Panasonic, exploring its evolution from a household name in electronics to a pioneering force in sustainable living. Its journey offers valuable lessons in reinvention and long-term vision.

Elsewhere, Gordon McLean explores the new frontier of market entry strategies, proving that success in branding today comes down to understanding the emotional resonance, not just the transaction.

For those with a thirst for history, "Who the Hell is Hiroshi Mikitani?" delves into the rise of the Rakuten founder and his transformative impact on Japan's e-commerce landscape. His bold decisions continue to redefine what it means to be a global business leader.

This issue also includes fresh insights into Japanese culture, branding, and the evolving landscape of digital marketing. Don't miss "Tomorrow Works Forever," a deep dive into the future of work in Japan, where technology and tradition must coexist.

Japanese Business Etiquette 101 this month offers a 5-point guide for newcomers in Japan, and Business Japanese for People in a Rush provides simple help on how to double-check details at work.

Finally, we take a moment to explore the book Bending Adversity. Author David Pilling brings the complexities of modern Japan into focus, reminding us that its spirit of reinvention continues to shape the nation as it navigates its future.

Thank you for being part of the UZU community. Let's step into spring with new purpose, and as always, keep the whirlpool turning!

Image: Shutterstock

KNOCK, KNOCK. WHO'S THERE?

BY PAUL ASHTON

Every so often, an industry reaches what seems like an unshakable peak. It dominates, defines an era, and feels as though it will last indefinitely. And then, in what seems like an instant, it collapses, giving way to something faster, smarter, cheaper. The cycle of disruption is as old as commerce itself, yet it never ceases to surprise us, even when people with enough foresight to see it coming let us know in advance. Each revolution, from the automobile replacing the horse-drawn carriage to gasoline usurping whale oil, and more recently AI, which is slowly but surely, upending traditional knowledge work, carries the same eerie inevitability: the incumbent never sees it coming until it is too late.

At the turn of the 20th century, cities bustled with horses. The economy, in many ways, was built around them, feed suppliers, carriage makers, blacksmiths. No one could imagine life without them. Then came the automobile. Clunky and impractical at first, it was a rich man's novelty. But Henry Ford changed that. His Model T, rolling off the assembly line in 1908, slashed production costs and made cars accessible to the masses. The horse-drawn carriage, once indispensable, became a relic. The infrastructure of cities themselves shifted to accommodate the new reality. The rules had changed.

This same pattern has played out in industry after industry, sometimes slowly, sometimes in a flash. The dominance of railways, once the backbone of long-distance travel, was undercut by the rise of commercial aviation in the early 20th century. Trains, while still relevant, could not compete with the speed and convenience of air travel. The movies, too, had their moment of reckoning when silent films gave way to "talkies" in the late 1920s. The Jazz Singer (1927) was a technical marvel, but it was more than that, it marked the death of an entire style of filmmaking. Studios that failed to adapt disappeared.

“THIS SAME PATTERN HAS PLAYED OUT IN INDUSTRY AFTER INDUSTRY, SOMETIMES SLOWLY, SOMETIMES IN A FLASH.”

Television did the same to radio. The personal computer shattered the dominance of mainframes. The internet dismantled traditional retail. Again and again, industries built on certainty discovered they were anything but stable. Blockbuster never saw Netflix coming. Taxi companies dismissed Uber as a fad. Hotel chains scoffed at the idea that travellers would rather rent a stranger's spare room than stay in a well-established brand. And yet, here we are. The lesson is never learned in time.

The disruptors often start small. A niche product, a curious experiment. Then they become inevitable. The moment people experience the better alternative, they rarely go back. E-commerce hollowed out shopping malls as online platforms made convenience king. Streaming has all but wiped out video rentals, (except perhaps for the few clingers on in Japan like GEO and Tsutaya), and now even cinema itself feels the pressure as audiences opt for at-home digital premieres. The move away from fossil fuels, once unthinkable, is slowly accelerating as electric vehicles and renewables push legacy energy industries toward the inevitability of obsolescence.

Finance, too, has undergone its revolution. FinTech startups, crypto, and decentralized finance models have chipped away at the fortress of traditional banking. Digital wallets, instant transactions, and AI-powered financial services are reshaping how money moves. The physical bank branch, much like the horse-drawn carriage, may soon become an artefact of the past.

And now, we arrive at artificial intelligence, the great disruptor of our time. AI is not merely changing a single industry; it is rewriting the very nature of work, creativity, and knowledge itself. Search engines, once the undisputed gatekeepers of the

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internet, face existential threats from AI-driven models that offer direct, conversational answers instead of lists of links. Google's dominance in search, long considered unassailable, is now openly being questioned as OpenAI, Meta, xAI and Perplexity, as well as, the latest models like DeepSeek present a new paradigm: search that talks back.

But in this story, we can DeepSeek is different. It is the new odd one out.

Unlike OpenAI, Google, Meta, or Elon Musk's xAI, each backed by billions in resources, supercomputer access, the very latest chipsets from Nvidia, and years of AI research, DeepSeek has emerged with strikingly little. A fraction of the funding, (although one founder is purported to have the backing of a few billion dollars in the form of a hedge fund), the fact of the matter is Deepseek started started with a fraction of the computational power, yet is giving results that place it in direct competition with the biggest players in the field. In late 2023, DeepSeek released its first AI model, a relative unknown in a landscape dominated by Western tech giants. Few outside China paid much attention. Then, in 2025, DeepSeek-R1 was unveiled, and the industry took notice.

With surprisingly strong benchmarks, DeepSeek-R1 was not just another AI model; it was a statement. It demonstrated that state-of-the-art AI did not necessarily require the colossal budgets of Silicon Valley or the vast data pipelines of Google

"IN 2025, DEEPSEEK R1 WAS UNVEILED, AND THE INDUSTRY TOOK NOTICE."

and Meta. It was efficient, lean, and built with far fewer resources. DeepSeek-Coder, its AI-powered coding assistant, followed soon after, throwing another wrench into the assumption that only the biggest tech firms could lead the charge in AI-generated software development.

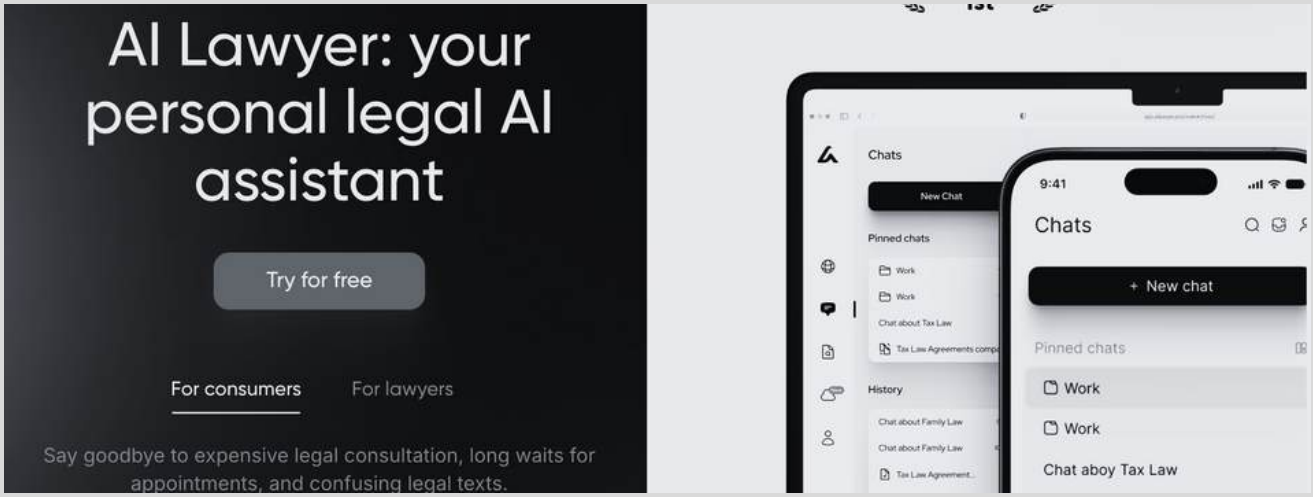
This is the kind of disruption that makes the incumbents (and their investors) nervous. OpenAI's GPT-4, Meta's Llama models, and Google's Gemini have been built on the assumption that scale is everything, more data, more compute, more money. DeepSeek's success suggests otherwise. It is doing with less what its competitors have done with more, proving that innovation is not necessarily a function of resources but of approach.

This echoes an older story. In the early days of the automobile industry, established carriage manufacturers scoffed at the idea that a machine could replace the reliability of a horse. They had the infrastructure, the capital, the brand recognition. And yet, they were outmaneuvered by leaner, more innovative players who understood what the future demanded.

The same fate met Kodak, which pioneered digital photography but clung to its film business, unable to believe its own invention would make it obsolete. Nokia, once the king of mobile phones, failed to see the smartphone revolution coming. In each case, the dominant players were blinded by their own success, unable to imagine that a smaller, scrappier competitor could change the rules of the game.

"THIS IS THE KIND OF DISRUPTION THAT MAKE THE INCUMBENTS (AND THEIR INVESTORS) NERVOUS."

DeepSeek's open-source model, and strong rise shows a similar shift is underway in AI. What happens next if it can match, or even exceed, the performance of OpenAI and Google with a fraction of the resources? What if another, even leaner competitor emerges, building off the lessons DeepSeek is now teaching the industry? The assumption that AI development belongs to a handful of mega-corporations is already starting to fray. Each disruption brings discomfort, resistance, nostalgia. But history is not sentimental. The old order rarely gets a dignified farewell, it is discarded unceremoniously as the new takes its place. AI, like the automobile, the airplane, and the internet before it, is not just an upgrade to existing tools; it is a fundamental shift in how society operates.



So, what comes next? If history is any guide, the industries that seem untouchable today will not be immune tomorrow. Traditional education, healthcare, law, and institutions, built over centuries, are already facing the early tremors of AI-driven transformation. The idea that an AI could outperform a lawyer in contract analysis, or diagnose diseases more accurately than a doctor, was once science fiction. Now, it is just another step in the cycle. The same question repeats itself with every disruption: what happens to the people left behind? The blacksmiths, the film projectionists, the travel agents, the retail workers, the bank tellers, the taxi drivers, each wave of innovation displaces workers who once seemed essential. The optimists argue that new jobs emerge, that progress ultimately creates more than it destroys. The pessimists warn of a tipping point where automation outpaces our ability to adapt.

Perhaps the biggest lesson from this relentless march of innovation is that nothing is permanent. The industries that define our lives today, Big Tech, finance, healthcare, even knowledge work itself, are not immune to the same fate as the horse-drawn carriage. AI is merely the latest disruptor, but it will not be the last. The only certainty is that the cycle will continue, and the next great shift may already be on the horizon, unnoticed, waiting for its moment to change the world.

!IF HISTORY IS ANY GUIDE, THE INDUSTRIES THAT SEEM UNTOUCHABLE TODAY WILL NOT BE IMMUNE TOMORROW."

Image: Shutterstock

CULTURAL ARTEFACTS FOR THE MODERN AGE

BY PAUL ASHTON

A logo is more than a pretty picture or a tidy arrangement of letters. It's the visual heartbeat of a brand, a symbol that embodies its history, values, and aspirations. When done right, a logo doesn't just represent a company; it becomes the company, a visual shorthand for everything it stands for. Whether it's Nike's swoosh, a minimalist stroke that captures motion, ambition, and triumph, or Toyota's steadfast text-based logo, every great logo carries a story. And the way those stories are told? That depends on where they come from.

The global stage of logo design is dominated by two powerhouses: Japan and the West. But their approaches couldn't be more different. Japanese logos cling tightly to text, leaning into centuries-old traditions of clarity and cultural reverence. Western logos, on the other hand, thrive on abstraction, favouring symbols that evoke emotion and transcend language barriers. These differences aren't random quirks; they're reflections of the distinct cultural and historical contexts that shaped them. To understand why logos look the way they do, you need to dig into the deeper forces at play, because in the world of branding, design is always downstream from culture.

Japanese logos don't scream for attention; they don't need to. Their power lies in their precision, rooted in centuries of cultural tradition. To understand why Japanese companies overwhelmingly favour text-based designs, you have to look back at the kamon, or family crests, of feudal Japan. These intricate designs were the visual signatures of noble families, incorporating stylised symbols of nature, geometry, and animals. Kamon weren't just decorative; they were identity distilled into art. A single emblem communicated lineage, loyalty, and status with razor-sharp clarity.

"TO UNDERSTAND WHY LOGOS LOOK THE WAY THEY DO, YOU NEED TO DIG INTO THE DEEPER FORCES AT PLAY"

But the story doesn't stop there. Japan also has a rich history of calligraphy, where writing itself is elevated to an art form. In Japanese culture, words are never just words. Each kanji character is a carefully constructed blend of meaning and visual harmony, designed to be both functional and beautiful. This cultural reverence for text carries through to modern logo design. When a Japanese company uses kanji or katakana in its logo, it's not just spelling out a name; it's making a statement. It's telling a story about tradition, identity, and an unshakable connection to cultural roots.

The industrialisation of the Meiji era (1868–1912) brought these traditions into the corporate sphere. As Japan began modernising, its companies needed logos that could stand out in an increasingly competitive landscape. Early designs paired kanji with simple graphic elements, creating logos that balanced tradition with the new demands of modern business. Over time, these text-heavy designs became a hallmark of Japanese branding, embodying the country's cultural priorities: clarity, trust, and a sense of permanence.

Today, Japanese logos remain firmly rooted in these values. When you see the logos of companies like Hitachi, Panasonic, or Sony, you're not looking at flashy attempts to grab attention. You're seeing bold, text-based declarations of reliability and professionalism, qualities that resonate deeply with Japanese consumers. These logos don't need to wow you; they need to assure you.

"WHEN A JAPANESE COMPANY USES KANJI OR KATAKANA IN ITS LOGO, IT'S NOT JUST SPELLING OUT A NAME; IT'S MAKING A STATEMENT"

Meanwhile, on the other side of the world, the West was forging a very different path. If Japanese logos are grounded in tradition and clarity, Western logos are fueled by ambition and abstraction. This shift didn't happen overnight; it was born out of necessity during the Industrial Revolution. As businesses expanded and markets grew, companies needed logos that could be recognised at a glance, even by people who didn't speak the same language. The result? A move toward bold, simple symbols that prioritised universal recognition.

This practicality was only the beginning. By the mid-20th century, branding in the West was no longer just about being recognised; it was about being felt. Logos became emotional triggers, symbols that invited interpretation and built personal connections with consumers. Take Nike's swoosh. It doesn't need a name to sell itself. Its shape embodies speed, ambition, and resilience. Apple's bitten apple isn't just a fruit; it's an open door to creativity, innovation, and a world of possibilities. Western logos moved beyond identification and became vehicles for storytelling, allowing brands to occupy emotional real estate in their customers' minds.

The rise of digital platforms only deepened this shift. In an era dominated by app icons and social media avatars, logos must be versatile, scalable, and instantly recognisable.

"AS MARKETS GREW, COMPANIES NEEDED LOGOS THAT COULD BE RECOGNISED AT A GLANCE, EVEN BY PEOPLE WHO DIDN'T SPEAK THE SAME LANGUAGE."

Abstract designs proved perfect for this landscape. Whether shrunk down to a tiny square on a smartphone screen or blown up on a billboard, these symbols maintained their impact. Western logos weren't just about recognition anymore; they were about adaptability, designed to thrive across countless physical and digital touchpoints.

While the West embraced abstraction with open arms, Japanese companies remained loyal to their text-first approach. This steadfastness isn't just cultural; it's strategic. Japanese business culture places immense value on trust, clarity, and stability, values that text-based logos communicate effortlessly. A kanji-heavy or text-heavy logo, for that matter, isn't just a design; it's a promise. It says, "You can rely on us. We're dependable, professional, and here to stay."

There's also a practical reason for this loyalty to text. Japanese companies have historically prioritised their domestic market, where kanji and katakana logos resonate deeply with local audiences. These designs are instantly recognisable to Japanese consumers, creating a sense of cultural connection that abstract symbols often lack. While Western brands often design for global appeal, Japanese logos are unapologetically local, steeped in cultural specificity.

That said, the world is changing, and so are Japanese logos. As globalisation accelerates, many Japanese companies are rethinking their branding strategies. For some, this simply meant taking a Japanese language logo and writing it in Romaji (Roman alphabet characters); for others, it meant embracing abstraction to compete on the global stage. Ajinomoto, for example, recently introduced a symbol-driven logo to reflect its international ambitions. Similarly, tech-forward brands like Mercari opt for universal, icon-based designs that function seamlessly in app-based ecosystems. These shifts signal a growing awareness among Japanese companies that the rules of branding are evolving in an increasingly interconnected world.

"JAPANESE BUSINESS CULTURE PLACES IMMENSE VALUE ON TRUST, CLARITY, AND STABILITY, VALUES THAT TEXT-BASED LOGOS COMMUNICATE EFFORTLESSLY."

But not all Japanese brands are ready to let go of tradition. Toyota, Canon, and Subaru remain firmly committed to text-based logos, even as they achieve global success. Their approach isn't about resistance to change; it's about balance. By subtly modernising their designs while staying true to their roots, these brands prove that tradition and innovation coexist.

Despite their aesthetic differences, Japanese and Western logos share a deeper truth: both are cultural artefacts shaped by the values and priorities of the societies that create them. Japanese logos tend to reflect a reverence for clarity, tradition, and stability, grounding brands in history and trustworthiness. Western logos, on the other hand, tend to thrive on emotion and abstraction, offering universality and the freedom of interpretation.

As globalisation and digitalisation continue to reshape branding, these approaches will inevitably influence one another. Japanese brands slowly adopt more abstract elements, while Western logos occasionally dip into text-based designs for a sense of timelessness. Yet, the essence of a great logo remains unchanged. Whether it's a kanji character or a swoosh, the power of a logo lies in its ability to mean something.

A logo isn't just an accessory; it's a brand's beating heart. When done right, it doesn't just represent a company; it becomes part of our lives. Whether it whispers stability or screams ambition, a truly great logo lingers. It leaves a mark, not just on the eye, but on the soul.

"BY SUBTLY MODERNISING THEIR DESIGNS WHILE STAYING TRUE TO THEIR ROOTS, THESE BRANDS PROVE THAT TRADITION AND INNOVATION COEXIST."

Image: FEARNOTRUTH

THE THREE-PART LAUNCH PLATFORM OF MARKET FIT, MARKET FEEL & MARKET FIND

BY GORDON MCLEAN

The process of launching a successful product into the market can be seen as three interconnected phases: Market Fit, Market Feel & Market Find.

Market Fit is the foundational phase where the alignment between the product and the target market is established. This phase is all about ensuring that what you are offering meets the actual needs, desires, and expectations of your potential customers. Achieving Market Fit involves a deep understanding of the problem your product solves and ensuring that your solution is compelling enough to generate demand. It's not just about creating a product that works; it's about creating a product that works for a specific group of people. This requires a thorough analysis of customer needs, market conditions, and the competitive landscape.

In the Market Fit phase, the focus is on identifying the right market segments where the product can thrive. This involves segmenting the market based on various factors such as demographics, behaviors, and psychographics to pinpoint the groups most likely to benefit from your offering. Once these segments are identified, the product's features, pricing, and value proposition must be tailored to align with the specific needs of these target audiences. The goal is to create a product that not only functions well but also resonates deeply with the users it is intended for. Without achieving Market Fit, even the most innovative products can fail to gain traction because they don't solve a relevant problem for the right audience.

"MARKET FIT IS THE FOUNDATIONAL PHASE WHERE THE ALIGNMENT BETWEEN THE PRODUCT AND THE TARGET MARKET IS ESTABLISHED."

Once Market Fit is established, the next phase is Market Feel. This phase focuses on the emotional connection and perception that the target market has towards the product. While Market Fit ensures that the product solves a real problem, Market Feel determines whether the product will be embraced and loved by consumers. It's about tapping into the emotions, values, and cultural trends that influence consumer behavior. Market Feel is what drives customers to not just buy a product but to advocate for it, share it with others, and remain loyal to it over time.

Achieving strong Market Feel requires understanding the emotional triggers that influence your target audience. This might involve crafting a compelling brand story, creating an aesthetically pleasing product design, or aligning the product with cultural trends that resonate with the audience. It's also about ensuring that the product delivers an experience that goes beyond functionality, providing joy, satisfaction, or even a sense of identity to the consumer. Market Feel is what differentiates products that are merely functional from those that become beloved brands. It's the difference between a product that customers use out of necessity and one that they use out of love.

Market Feel is also closely tied to the way the product is marketed and communicated. The messaging, tone, and channels used to reach the target audience all play a role in shaping the perception of the product. A strong Market Feel is achieved when the product's value proposition is not only understood but also emotionally embraced by the audience. It involves creating a sense of anticipation and excitement around the product, making consumers feel like they are part of something special when they choose your brand.

"ACHIEVING STRONG MARKET FEEL REQUIRES UNDERSTANDING THE EMOTIONAL TRIGGERS THAT INFLUENCE YOUR TARGET AUDIENCE."

The third phase, Market Find, is about being strategic and forward-thinking, identifying where the next big opportunities lie, and positioning your product to take advantage of them.

Market Find requires a deep understanding of market dynamics and the ability to recognize shifts in consumer behavior, technological advancements, or socio-economic changes that create new opportunities. It involves conducting thorough market research to uncover gaps in the market where your product can provide a unique solution. Once these opportunities are identified, the challenge is to develop a Go-To-Market plan that effectively targets the right segments and captures their attention.

The GTM plan is a critical component of Market Find. It outlines how you will introduce your product to the identified market segments, ensuring that your launch is strategic, impactful, and aligned with the needs of the audience. This plan includes decisions on product positioning, pricing, distribution channels, and marketing strategies. A successful GTM plan ensures that the product not only enters the market but does so with a strong presence, quickly gaining traction and building a customer base.

Targeting the right market segments involves more than just identifying who your customers are. It's about understanding their specific needs, pain points, and desires, and crafting a product offering that speaks directly to them. This might involve creating tailored marketing messages, selecting the right sales channels, or even adapting the product itself to better meet the expectations of different segments. The goal is to ensure that the product resonates with the audience on a deeper level, making it not just a good fit for the market, but a product that stands out in the market.

"A SUCCESSFUL GTM PLAN ENSURES THAT THE PRODUCT NOT ONLY ENTERS THE MARKET BUT DOES SO WITH A STRONG PRESENCE"

Gordon McLean
Founder
Fear No Truth
www.fearnotruth.com

Together, this trilogy of Market Fit, Market Feel & Market Find can provide a solid blueprint to take a new product successfully to market. Market Fit ensures that the product is relevant and meets a real need, Market Feel creates a strong emotional connection that drives customer loyalty, and Market Find identifies the right opportunities for market entry and expansion.

By carefully navigating these phases, businesses can max their chances of success, ensure their product not only enters the market but thrives in it, and build a strong brand, with a large and loyal customer base.

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.

"BY CAREFULLY NAVIGATING THESE PHASES, BUSINESSES CAN MAX THEIR CHANCES OF SUCCESS."

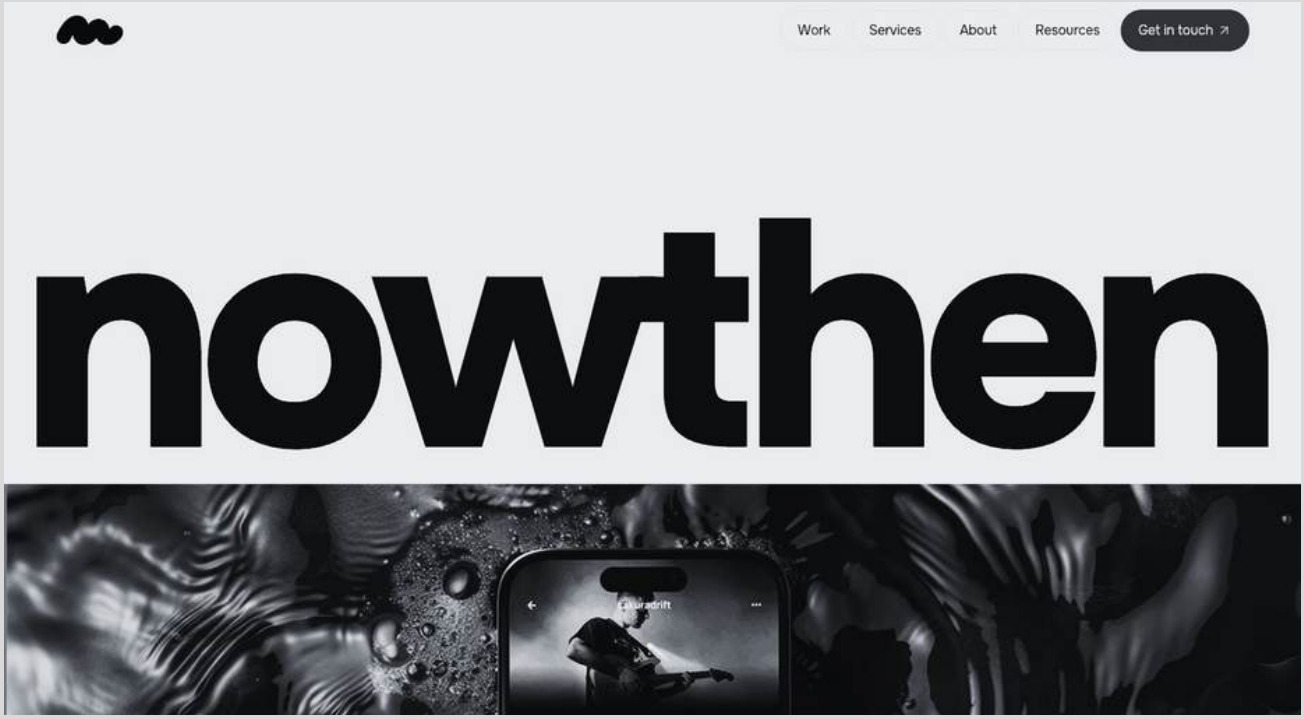
Image: UZU

INSIDE THE WHIRLPOOL with RAPHAEL HODÉ

Design has always been a part of my life. As a kid, I was constantly tinkering in the craft and design department at school, fascinated by how things were made. That passion led me to study Industrial Design and Technology at Loughborough University, a place known for both its design excellence and rugby team, an easy choice for me. My final project? Speakers made from recycled yogurt pot plastic! But life took me in a different direction, and after moving to Japan, I found new ways to feed my creative drive, through UZU and Ulpa.

So when I came across Raphael Hodé on LinkedIn, I was immediately drawn to his story. An expat like me, Raphael has carved out a successful career in the design world, co-founding nowthen, a Tokyo-based studio that takes a unique approach to building brands, products, and websites for startups across Japan and APAC. His team works with a mix of local and international talent, using a structured, systemized model that keeps costs down and quality high. Rather than the traditional custom approach, they offer "productized services," identifying what startups need most and delivering fixed-process, fixed-price solutions. Their openness, sharing insights online, mentoring, and running workshops, sets them apart in an industry often guarded about process.

I knew I had to talk to him. So I reached out, and we put him through our signature Inside the Whirlpool questions. The result? A fascinating dive into startup design, productized services, and what it takes to build a thriving creative business in Japan, one that any founder, designer, or creative thinker will enjoy.



"RAPHAEL HAS CARVED OUT A SUCCESSFUL CAREER IN THE DESIGN WORLD, CO-FOUNDING NOWTHEN"

What inspired you to start your business in Japan?
After seven years at the Japanese branch of a global design and innovation firm, I decided to leave and co-found a startup. We had a good run, but after about a year, our energy, and our bank accounts, started running low. To stay afloat, we offered our design skills to other startup founders. It turned out to be a game-changer, not just for our cash flow but also for our confidence. We saw the opportunity and ran with it, transforming our own startup into a design studio for startups.

As for why Japan and not somewhere else? Honestly, Japan is where we lived, so it's where we started! But looking back, I do wonder if being in a country that isn't my own played a role in pushing me toward entrepreneurship. There was a study in the US showing that immigrants make a disproportionate share of entrepreneurs. Maybe it's because the 'normal' career path already feels unconventional for us as foreigners, so taking the leap into entrepreneurship doesn't seem as radical as it might in the comfort of our own culture.

How does Japan's business culture shape your approach?
Not much, honestly.

The startup world operates quite differently from the corporate world and follows its own culture, one that's surprisingly universal. In day-to-day startup life, the mindset and challenges tend to be the same whether you're in Tokyo, Singapore, or San Francisco.

Of course, when working with startups targeting the Japanese market, especially in B2B, we need to adapt designs, messaging, sales tactics, etc. to fit the local context. But in terms of how we collaborate with clients, the dynamics tend to be quite similar, whether we're working with a fully Japanese-speaking startup or a more international team.

"WE SAW THE OPPORTUNITY AND RAN WITH IT, TRANSFORMING OUR OWN STARTUP INTO A DESIGN STUDIO FOR STARTUPS."

What was a key moment that helped you succeed in Japan?
I'm still waiting for our big day!

No, more seriously, there hasn't been a single breakthrough moment. Our growth has been more about steady, incremental improvements that have compounded over time. So if anything, the key moments that have helped us succeed are all the times we've received feedback from clients, or sat down to review our processes and identified ways to improve. It's that continuous cycle of learning and refining that keeps us moving forward.

How do you build strong relationships with clients and partners here?
For us, and I'm not sure this is specific to doing business in Japan, building relationships comes down to a mix of generosity, honesty, and high standards.

We try to give as much as we can, whether it's advice, content, or feedback, as long as it doesn't put our business at risk. We share online, speak at events, and host free feedback sessions and workshops.

We also prioritize honesty. We don't sell anything we don't believe in. It's not uncommon for us to tell a startup that we're not the right partner for them at this stage, or for example that it might not be the right time to invest in a rebranding.

Lastly, we hold ourselves to high standards. When working with startups, the natural tendency is to focus on what's fast, cheap, and "good enough." But we push ourselves to do better because we think early-stage companies deserve more than just the bare minimum.

"IN JAPAN, BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS COMES DOWN TO A MIX OF GENEROSITY, HONESTY, AND HIGH STANDARDS."

I believe this mix of generosity, honesty, and high standards helps build good relationships that fuel our business. At least, that's the hypothesis we're working with right now!

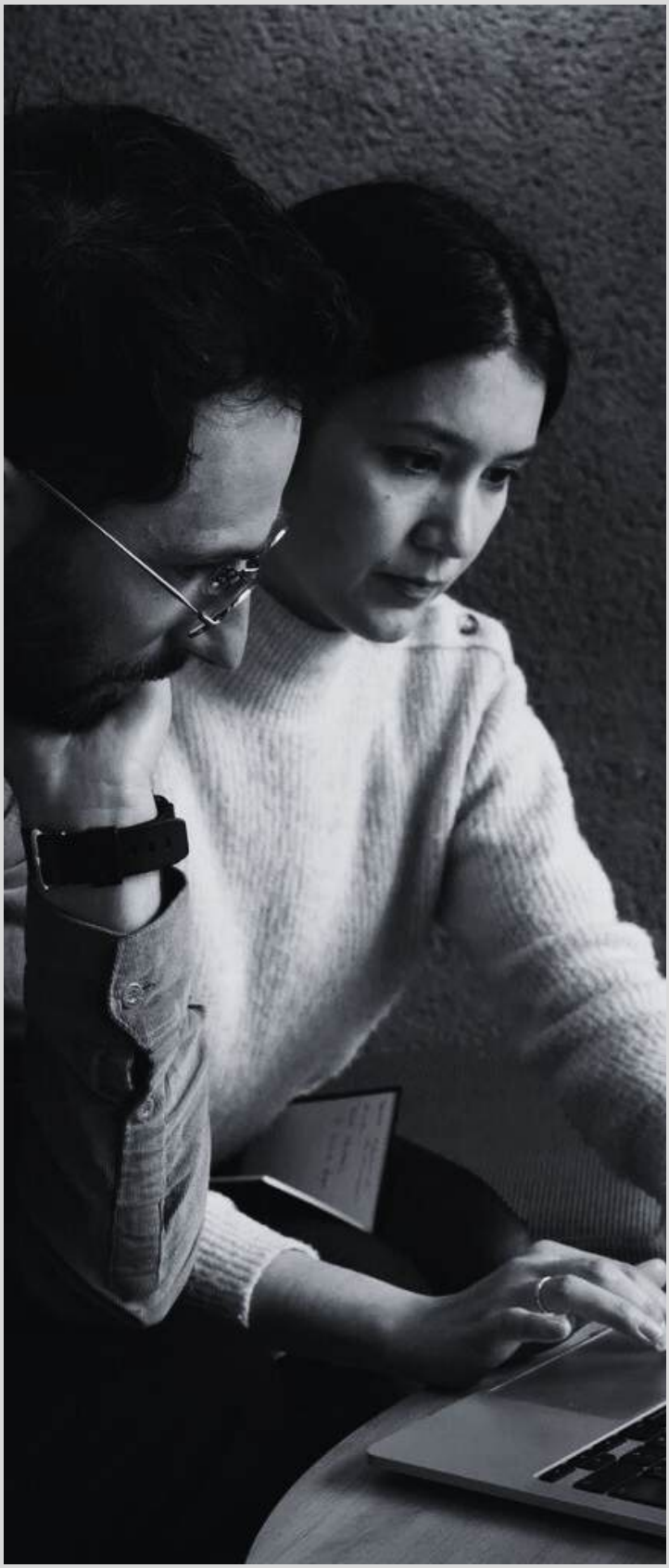
How do you handle Japan's regulatory requirements?
Our industry isn't heavily impacted by regulatory frameworks, so there's not much to navigate on that front.

For the occasional legal or administrative matters we do encounter, we rely on outside help.

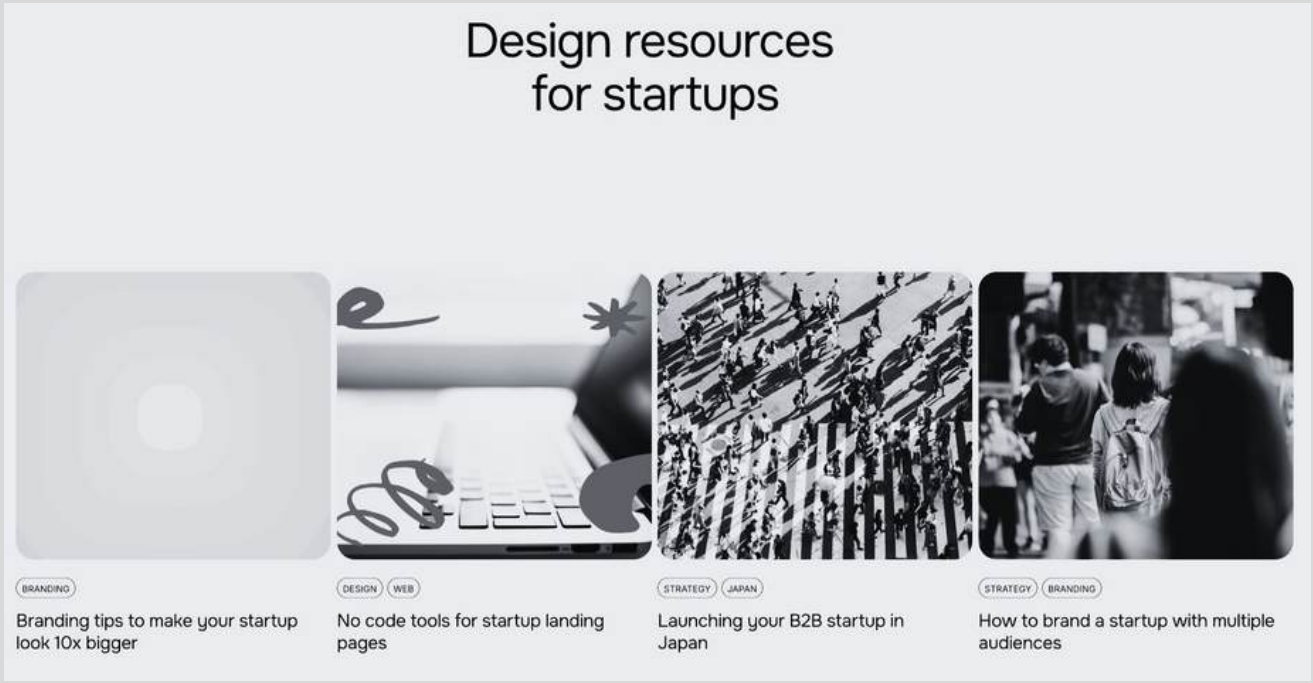
What role does innovation play in your strategy?
Well, first, we're literally in the business of innovation. We help startups launch products and create new markets, so it's something we work with every day.

Second, we're also trying to innovate in how we operate as a design studio. People often ask how we make it work financially, given that startups typically need more, in less time, with tighter budgets. A traditional agency setup wouldn't work. So we've had to rethink everything, our pricing, delivery processes, and how we allocate resources, to create a model that fits the way startups operate.

Honestly, we haven't fully cracked it yet, but I think we're onto something.



"STARTUPS TYPICALLY NEED MORE, IN LESS TIME, WITH TIGHTER BUDGETS."



Can you share a marketing tactic that worked well in Japan?
In the case of nowthen, we don't do any outbound marketing.
100% of our leads come from direct connections, referrals, or people being exposed to our content. So that's what we've been doubling down on. Now, I don't think this is necessarily unique to Japan.

What skills are crucial for success in Japan?
I'm assuming we're talking about what it takes for a foreigner to succeed in Japan.
Here's how I see it: whether you're looking for work or building a business, 95% of doors are either closed to you or extremely difficult to get through. Of course, the longer you live here, the better you speak the language, and the more you navigate the corporate culture, the lower that number gets.

But maybe the real skill isn't about forcing those doors open, it's about getting really good at finding the 5% that are open to you (and possibly closed to locals). That's how I got my first job here. I thought, "Who needs my skill set so badly that they'd be willing to compromise on my language skills?"

Likewise, with our business, if we tried running an agency working with big local brands, I'd probably face some pretty strong obstacles. However, the startup scene in Tokyo isn't as mature as it is in other global hubs, and there aren't many design practitioners who truly understand how to bring value to an early-stage company. On top of that, as I mentioned earlier, startups aren't as 'local' in the way they operate. So that became an obvious "5%" for us to go after.

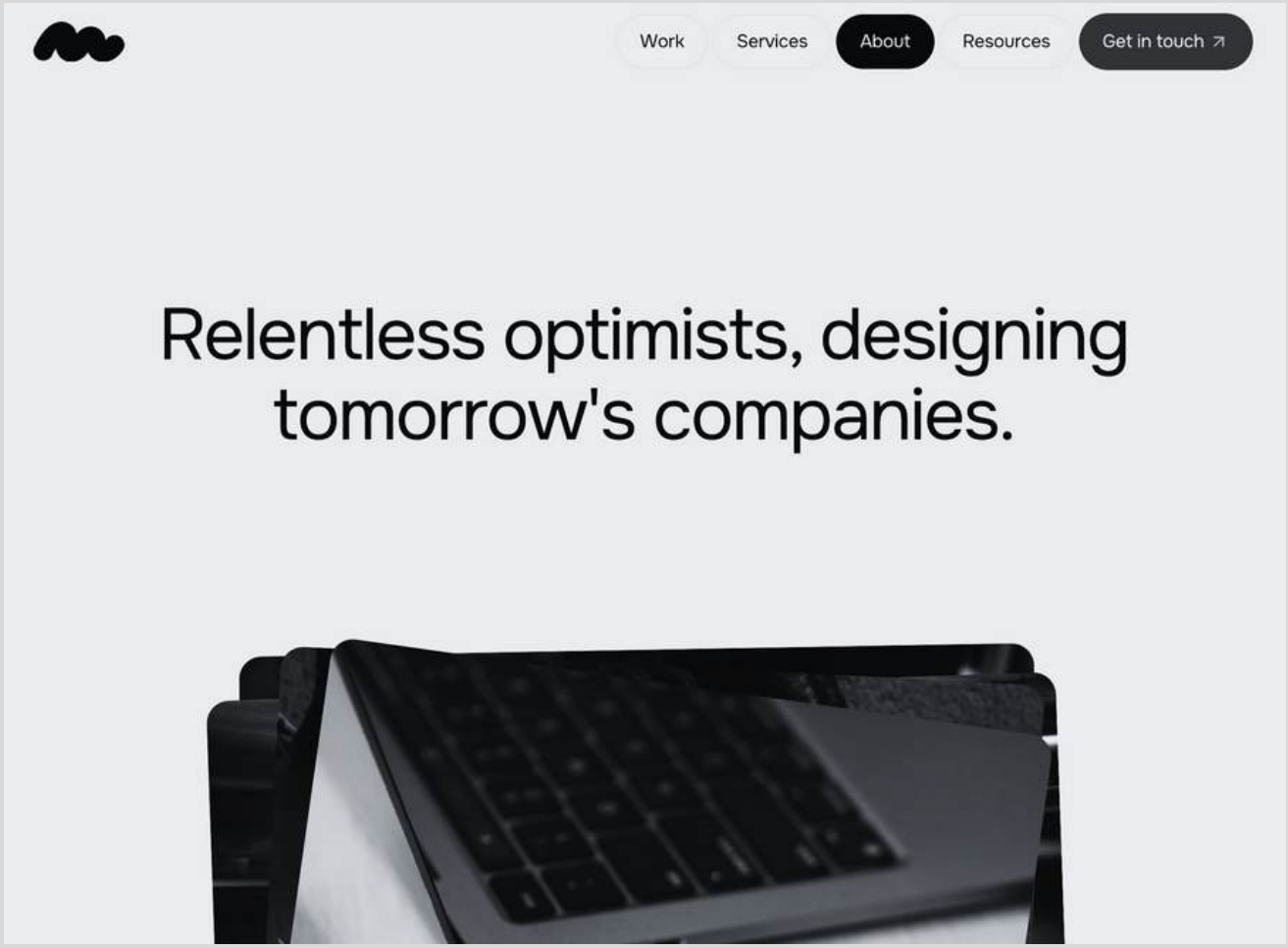
"95% OF DOORS ARE EITHER CLOSED TO YOU OR EXTREMELY DIFFICULT TO GET THROUGH."

How do you balance respecting tradition with introducing new ideas?

I don't have a practical answer if we're talking specifically about Japanese traditions, it's honestly not something I've actively worked with.

However, if we take a step back and think of tradition as simply the status quo, the way things have always been done, here's how I see it: a disruptive idea that isn't relatable won't take root. We always tell founders that they have to translate their innovation so people in the present can understand it.

Sometimes, the best way to introduce a new idea is to anchor it in what's already familiar. When branding a startup that's disrupting an industry, we often tap into that industry's existing codes to create an entry point for trust and recognition. Similarly, when designing products with emerging technologies like generative AI, we look for ways to package the technology into familiar mental models, making it easier for users to understand and adopt.



"WE ALWAYS TELL FOUNDERS THAT THEY HAVE TO TRANSLATE THEIR INNOVATION SO PEOPLE IN THE PRESENT CAN UNDERSTAND IT."

So in a way, established norms aren't necessarily obstacles to change, they can be the best bridge for introducing new ideas.

What one piece of advice would you give to newcomers entering Japan?
Echoing one of my previous points, I would say: find your edge.

Figure out where and how you can bring value so that being you isn't a hurdle, but an advantage. Instead of trying to fit into a system that wasn't designed for you, or attempting to change it before you've even entered it, which is a temptation I see in many newcomers, focus on finding the gaps where your unique perspective or skills can make a difference.

A huge thanks to Raphael for taking the time to share his journey and insights. His work at nowthen is proof that great design and smart business can go hand in hand. If you're a startup looking for structured, high-impact design solutions, check them out at nowthen.

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

Raphael Hodé
Co-Founder & CEO
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https://nowthen.cc/

"FIGURE OUT WHERE AND HOW YOU CAN BRING VALUE SO THAT BEING YOU ISN'T A HURDLE, BUT AN ADVANTAGE."

Image: UZU

RIDING THE KUROSHIO with PANASONIC

BY PAUL ASHTON

Panasonic's story is a quiet epic. It's the tale of a company that has, for more than a century, woven itself into the fabric of daily life, not with loud innovation or flashy headlines, but through a steady commitment to making things that matter. Founded in 1918 by the 23-year-old Konosuke Matsushita, Panasonic began not with grand ambitions of global domination, but with something far humbler: a two-pronged light socket. It was a small invention with a simple purpose, allowing people to power electrical appliances from a single source, but it contained within it the company's DNA: practical, thoughtful design meant to improve everyday living.

What followed was a relentless expansion of this idea. As Japan rebuilt itself after World War II, Panasonic emerged as one of the key architects of postwar prosperity, helping to define modern domestic life. Radios, washing machines, rice cookers, refrigerators, each new product was another step toward a vision of material abundance, goods so plentiful and affordable that they could be as accessible as tap water. Panasonic wasn't just making appliances; it was shaping what modern life looked like in Japan.

This domestic focus gave Panasonic a unique sensibility. While Western companies chased prestige projects and global headlines, Panasonic quietly embedded itself into the everyday. And yet, the company knew when to look outward. By the 1960s, it had begun expanding overseas, creating the Panasonic brand for markets where its preferred "National" name was already taken. Its Technics turntables became cult favourites among audiophiles worldwide, and its televisions and home electronics became staples in homes far beyond Japan's borders. For a time, it seemed Panasonic had mastered the balance between domestic strength and international ambition.

"AS JAPAN REBUILT ITSELF AFTER WORLD WAR II, PANASONIC EMERGED AS ONE OF THE KEY ARCHITECTS OF POSTWAR PROSPERITY"

But no company's ascent is without its stumbles. The 1990s saw Panasonic, then known as Matsushita Electric Industrial Co., take a bold step into the entertainment business by acquiring MCA, the parent company of Universal Pictures. It was a move designed to mirror Sony's successful acquisition of Columbia Pictures, but the gamble backfired. The cultural chasm between a Japanese industrial giant and the unpredictable world of Hollywood proved too wide. Within five years, the company sold most of MCA, having learned an expensive lesson in the risks of diversification without alignment.

The new millennium brought further challenges. Panasonic's dominance in consumer electronics was eroded by the rise of faster, more aggressive competitors like Samsung and LG. The transition from analogue to digital caught Panasonic flat-footed. By 2006, it had ceased production of analogue TVs, a bitter concession for a company that once led the global television market. The world had changed, and Panasonic seemed stuck between the old and the new.

Yet, beneath the surface, the company was preparing for reinvention. It had always been more than a consumer electronics brand, especially at home in Japan. Panasonic wasn't just about white goods or audio equipment; it had quietly become a builder of entire lifestyles. In Japan, Panasonic homes, yes, actual houses built by the company, are seen as the pinnacle of design and technology integration. These aren't simple constructions;

"THE WORLD HAD CHANGED, AND PANASONIC SEEMED STUCK BETWEEN THE OLD AND THE NEW."

they are smart living environments, complete with energy-efficient systems and seamlessly integrated technologies. Panasonic even co-developed Fujisawa Sustainable Smart Town, a community designed to showcase the future of urban living, where homes, cars, and public spaces are connected in a clean, efficient ecosystem.

These domestic ventures reveal a Panasonic few outside Japan see. It's a company designing entire neighbourhoods, not just the appliances within them. It develops advanced healthcare solutions, like refrigeration systems essential for storing pharmaceuticals, and robotics tailored for elder care, addressing the needs of Japan's aging population with the same quiet pragmatism that defined its earliest products. In a nation grappling with demographic decline, Panasonic's technologies are helping shape the future of care and living.

This focus on infrastructure and systems, rather than just products, hints at the company's evolving identity. While Panasonic's brand abroad became associated with consumer electronics and, more recently, batteries for Tesla's electric vehicles, in Japan it has long been something more holistic. It builds spaces, supports healthcare, and provides energy solutions, embedding itself into the architecture of daily life in ways few global consumers realise.

"PANASONIC'S TECHNOLOGIES ARE HELPING SHAPE THE FUTURE OF CARE AND LIVING."

But staying relevant globally required more visible moves. Recognising the future lay beyond televisions and refrigerators, Panasonic pivoted towards the automotive and energy sectors. Its partnership with Tesla, supplying batteries for the automaker's vehicles and investing heavily in the Nevada Gigafactory, represented a bold new direction. This wasn't merely diversification; it was a strategic gamble on the future of mobility and sustainable energy. Yet, even here, Panasonic faced challenges. Tesla's decision to bring battery production in-house and competition from Chinese and South Korean manufacturers gnawed at Panasonic's market share. The battery business, while promising, proved as volatile as the consumer electronics market it had left behind.

Still, the company pressed on. Recent investments in U.S. battery plants and partnerships with car manufacturers like Toyota suggest Panasonic remains determined to be a key player in the global shift toward electric mobility. In 2022, it reorganised itself into Panasonic Holdings Corporation, splitting its operations into a series of subsidiaries. The move echoed similar restructurings by other Japanese giants like Sony, allowing for greater flexibility and responsiveness in an era where speed and specialisation matter more than ever.

Yet, one question lingers: what will Panasonic be known for in the coming decades? Sony has carved out a space in entertainment and gaming, Samsung reigns in smartphones and displays, and Apple dominates personal technology. Panasonic's identity is less obvious. The revival of its beloved Technics audio brand in 2014 was a nod to its legacy, but nostalgia alone cannot define the future.

"PANASONIC REMAINS DETERMINED TO BE A KEY PLAYER IN THE GLOBAL SHIFT TOWARD ELECTRIC MOBILITY."

Perhaps Panasonic's strength lies precisely in its lack of a singular identity. It has always been a company of quiet ubiquity, present everywhere but rarely at the centre of attention. It may never dominate global headlines with a must-have gadget, but it will power the systems that make future living possible. The company's focus on smart cities, energy solutions, and mobility infrastructure suggests it is positioning itself as the connective tissue of tomorrow's technological landscape.

"IT MAY NEVER DOMINATE GLOBAL HEADLINES WITH A MUST-HAVE GADGET, BUT IT WILL POWER THE SYSTEMS THAT MAKE FUTURE LIVING POSSIBLE."

This role, while less glamorous, may prove more enduring. After all, Panasonic's history is one of persistent reinvention. It survived wars, economic crises, and technological disruptions that felled many of its contemporaries. Its founder, Konosuke Matsushita, spoke of a 250-year plan for the company, divided into ten 25-year periods of construction, activity, and fulfilment. It's a staggeringly long view, but perhaps that's what sets Panasonic apart: a patience born of deep confidence that its relevance will be defined not by momentary dominance, but by lasting impact.

In a world dazzled by rapid innovation and fleeting trends, Panasonic's story is a reminder that quiet, steady reinvention can be just as transformative. From a light socket in a tenement room to smart cities and electric car batteries, Panasonic's journey isn't just a corporate narrative, it's a reflection of how the things we rely on most are often those we notice least. As the company looks to the future, its challenge isn't to capture attention, but to remain essential. And if history is any guide, it will do just that, illuminating the world not with spectacle, but with substance.

"PANASONIC'S STORY IS A REMINDER THAT QUIET, STEADY REINVENTION CAN BE JUST AS TRANSFORMATIVE."

Image: Tumblr

NIHON E YŌKOSO

BY PAUL ASHTON

Japan has always captivated the world's imagination. It is a place where ancient temples stand in the shadows of hyper-modern skyscrapers, where serene ryokan and bustling izakaya coexist in the same city block. For decades, it has been a dream destination, an island nation with a culture both deeply traditional and thrillingly futuristic. And now, more people than ever are making that dream a reality.

In 2023, Japan welcomed over 36 million foreign visitors, surpassing its pre-pandemic high. International tourists poured a staggering $51 billion into the economy in 2024, with the government setting its sights on an even more ambitious goal: 60 million annual visitors by 2030. The weak yen has only fuelled this boom, making Japan an irresistible bargain for travellers from China, Southeast Asia, and the West. From the neon-lit streets of Tokyo to the historic alleyways of Kyoto, from the snow-dusted peaks of Hokkaido to the subtropical islands of Okinawa, the country is now in the throes of an unprecedented tourism surge.

At first glance, it seems like a triumphant economic success. But behind the celebratory numbers lies a mounting crisis. Japan is struggling to contain the side effects of its own tourism boom. The term "overtourism" has become part of the national lexicon, a shorthand for the overcrowding, environmental degradation, and social strain that mass tourism brings. Kyoto's residents can barely board their own buses.

"THE COUNTRY IS NOW IN THE THROES OF AN UNPRECEDENTED TOURISM SURGE."

The trails of Mount Fuji are strewn with litter. Takayama, once a quiet mountain town, is now struggling to absorb the influx of foreign sightseers. What was once an economic panacea is beginning to look like an unmanageable burden.

The question is whether Japan can its manjyu and eat it. Can it sustain its tourism-driven economic growth without destroying the very things that make it such an alluring place to visit?

The country's push for inbound tourism began in earnest in the early 2000s. In 2003, the government launched the Visit Japan Campaign, hoping to double the number of foreign tourists by 2010. The effort worked. The number of international arrivals skyrocketed, aided by relaxed visa policies, aggressive marketing, and an explosion of budget travel options across Asia. By 2019, Japan was the third most visited country in Asia, just behind China and Thailand. The government saw an economic jackpot and raised its ambitions: first 40 million visitors by 2020, then 60 million by 2030.

But while the pandemic briefly halted tourism, it also exposed the economy's growing dependence on it. Now, Japan is making up for lost time. Foreign visitors are spending more than ever, shopping in Japan in general but also staying in ryokan in rural towns, and lining up for Michelin-starred ramen. Yet the surge has put immense pressure on infrastructure, with airports, public transportation, and hotels struggling to keep up. The strain is especially visible in historic cities like Kyoto, where narrow streets built centuries ago for wooden carts now contend with tour buses and endless streams of camera-wielding visitors.

"WHAT WAS ONCE AN ECONOMIC PANACEA IS BEGINNING TO LOOK LIKE AN UNMANAGEABLE BURDEN."

For businesses, the tourism boom has been a mixed blessing. The hospitality sector, from five-star hotels to tiny guesthouses, has seen record demand. Some hotels have repurposed entire wedding halls as dormitories just to house the foreign workers they now rely on. But the labour market has reached a breaking point. Japan's aging workforce cannot meet demand, forcing the industry to recruit heavily from Nepal, Myanmar, and the Philippines. Even with these reinforcements, many inns and restaurants are turning away guests, unable to keep up with the sheer volume of arrivals.

And then there is Kyoto, the poster child for overtourism. The city that once embodied wabi-sabi, Japan's aesthetic of simplicity and impermanence, has become an overwhelmed tourist machine. Locals can no longer board buses to work, their spaces occupied by visitors en route to Fushimi Inari Shrine. The iconic bamboo groves of Arashiyama are now packed shoulder-to-shoulder with influencers and YouTubers, chasing the perfect shot. Even the city's famed geisha district, Gion, has been overrun by tourists who mistake maiko (apprentice geisha) for cosplay attractions, blocking their paths for selfies. In response, Kyoto has enacted increasingly drastic measures: new express bus routes at nearly double the normal fare, higher accommodation taxes, and discussions about further restrictions on short-term rentals.

The problem isn't limited to Kyoto. Mount Fuji, one of Japan's most iconic natural landmarks, is at risk of being loved to death. The number of climbers has exploded, leading to traffic jams on its slopes, overburdened mountain huts, and serious environmental damage. Authorities are now

"MANY INNS AND RESTAURANTS ARE TURNING AWAY GUESTS, UNABLE TO KEEP UP WITH THE SHEER VOLUME OF ARRIVALS."

considering mandatory reservations and higher entry fees, a move that echoes Venice's introduction of a "day-tripper" tax. Similar measures have been taken across the world: Amsterdam has banned new hotels, Barcelona has cracked down on Airbnbs, and Thailand has temporarily closed some of its most famous beaches to allow them to recover. Japan has yet to take such drastic action, but the warning signs are clear.

The irony is that while tourists are flooding into Japan's most famous sites, much of the country remains untouched. The vast, mountainous landscapes of Tohoku, the coastal villages of Shikoku, and the volcanic wilderness of Kyushu see only a fraction of the visitors that descend on Kyoto and Tokyo. The government has recognised this imbalance and is now trying to steer tourists toward lesser-known destinations. The Japan Sustainable Tourism Standard for Destinations (JSTS-D) was launched as a model for managing tourism across regions, aiming to spread out visitor traffic and promote eco-friendly travel. But shifting the habits of international travellers is no easy task. Tokyo, Kyoto, and Osaka remain the default itinerary, and social media continues to funnel tourists toward the same few "bucket list" locations.

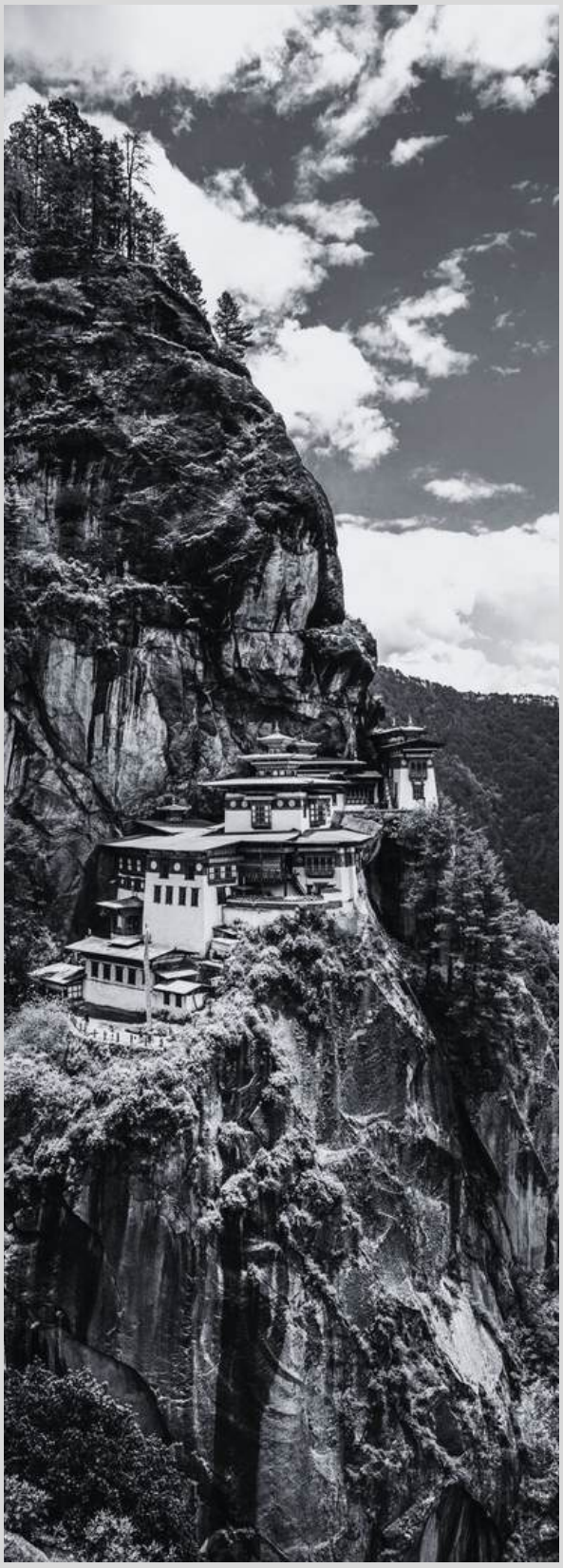
Technology might offer part of the solution. Japan is uniquely positioned to use AI-driven crowd management, real-time congestion tracking, and dynamic pricing to distribute visitors more evenly. The government has also invested heavily in digital tourism infrastructure, from multilingual mobile apps to AI-powered travel assistants. The question is whether these innovations can keep pace with the swelling demand.

"THE IRONY IS THAT WHILE TOURISTS ARE FLOODING INTO JAPAN'S MOST FAMOUS SITES, MUCH OF THE COUNTRY REMAINS UNTOUCHED."

If Japan is to meet its goal of 60 million tourists by 2030 without collapsing under the weight of its own success, it must rethink what sustainable tourism actually means. The old model, more visitors, more money, no longer works. The future has to be about smarter tourism: longer stays instead of quick-hit sightseeing, higher-value travel over mass volume, and experiences that encourage cultural immersion rather than checklist tourism.

Countries like Iceland and Bhutan have already embraced this shift. Iceland, faced with its own wave of overtourism, introduced higher fees for visitors and emphasised premium, nature-based experiences. Bhutan has taken it even further, implementing a "high-value, low-impact" tourism model where visitors pay a daily sustainable development fee, ensuring that the economic benefits of tourism are balanced against its costs. Japan, with its meticulous urban planning and deep-rooted emphasis on harmony, is well positioned to craft a tourism model that enhances rather than erodes its cultural and natural treasures.

Tourism, at its best, is not just an economic transaction. It is an exchange, a meeting of cultures, a bridge between worlds. If Japan can find a way to balance these forces, it will not only safeguard its own identity but also offer a model for how the world can reimagine travel in the 21st century. The challenge is immense, but so is the opportunity. The future of Japan's tourism industry will not be determined by how many people visit, but by how well it manages those who do.



"THE FUTURE HAS TO BE ABOUT SMARTER TOURISM: LONGER STAYS INSTEAD OF QUICK-HIT SIGHTSEEING"

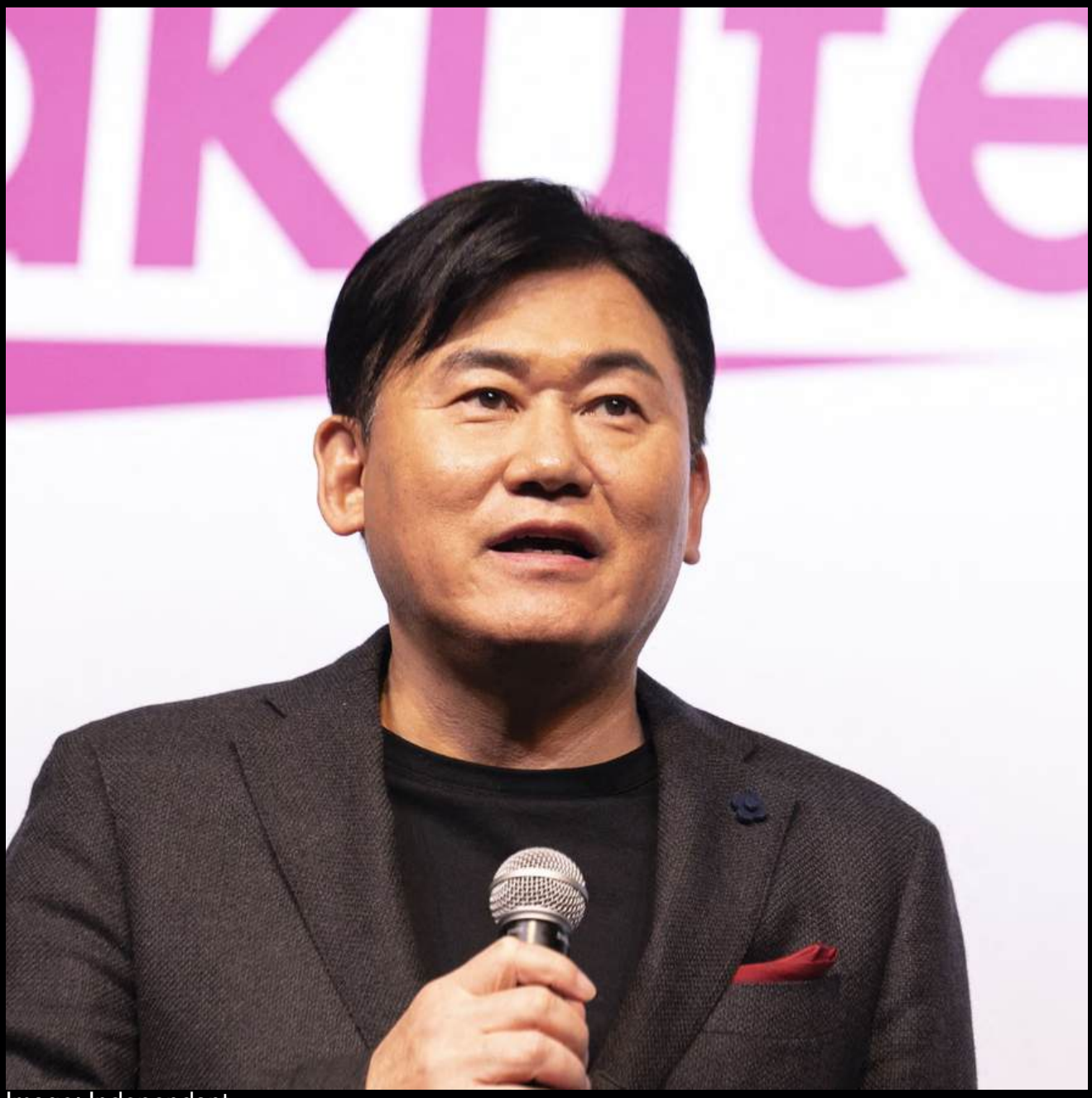
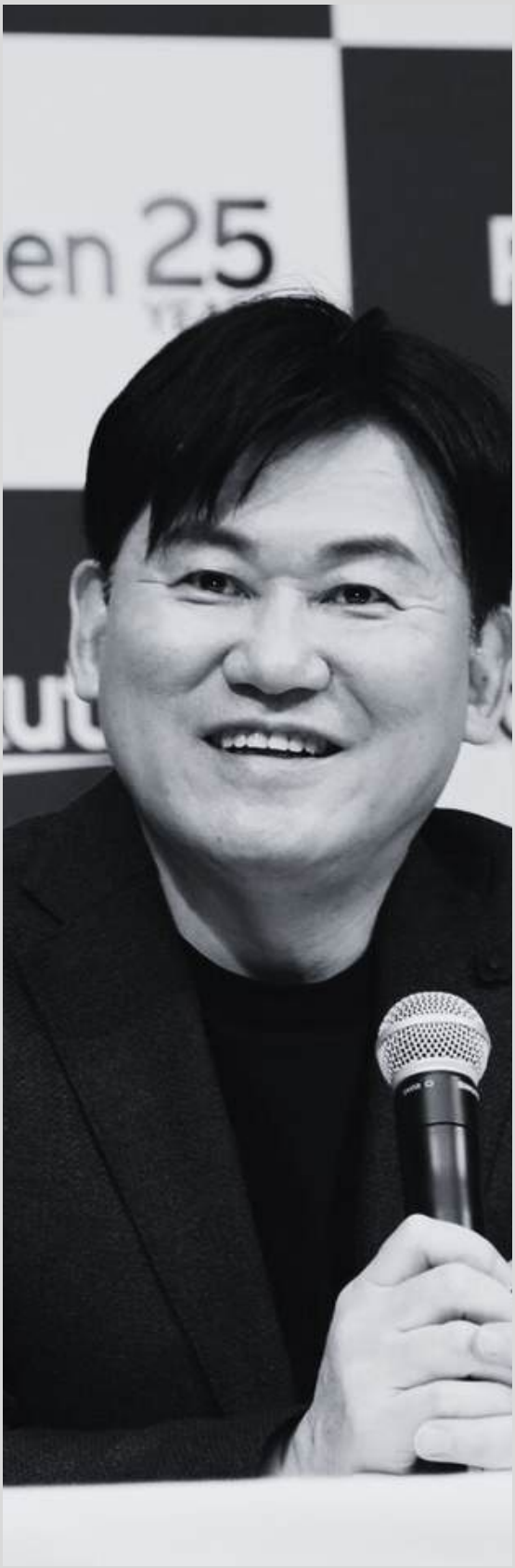


Image: Independant

WHO THE HELL IS HIROSHI MIKITANI?

BY PAUL ASHTON

If you've ever scrolled through a shopping site, booked a hotel with a few taps, or caught a football match featuring global stars, you've likely felt the ripple effects of Hiroshi Mikitani's ambition. Yet, outside Japan, his name barely registers in the popular imagination. Unlike Jeff Bezos or Elon Musk, Mikitani doesn't dominate Western headlines. But maybe he should. His story, after all, isn't just about building a multi-billion-dollar company; it's about challenging the very assumptions of how Japanese business should look, feel, and behave in a globalised world.



Mikitani, founder and CEO of Rakuten, Inc., is a man who embodies contradictions: a Harvard-educated banker turned entrepreneur, a globalist who champions Japanese tradition, and a capitalist who insists that corporations must contribute to humanity. His journey from the quiet streets of Kobe to the helm of one of Japan's most ambitious tech empires reveals a man obsessed not just with success, but with transformation, of his country, of industries, and of mindsets.

To understand Mikitani, you must start in Kobe, a city defined by its cosmopolitan edges and, later, by its tragic vulnerability. Born in 1965, Mikitani grew up in a family where intellect wasn't just valued; it was expected. His father, Ryoichi Mikitani, was an economist, a man so driven that he became Japan's first Fulbright Scholar to the US. The family lived briefly in New Haven while Ryoichi taught at Yale. Hiroshi's mother, Setsuko, was equally impressive, a Kobe University graduate who had spent her childhood years in New York. Their home straddled two worlds: Japanese traditions at the dinner table, but American conversations in the background.

"UNLIKE JEFF BEZOS OR ELON MUSK, MIKITANI DOESN'T DOMINATE WESTERN HEADLINES. BUT MAYBE HE SHOULD."

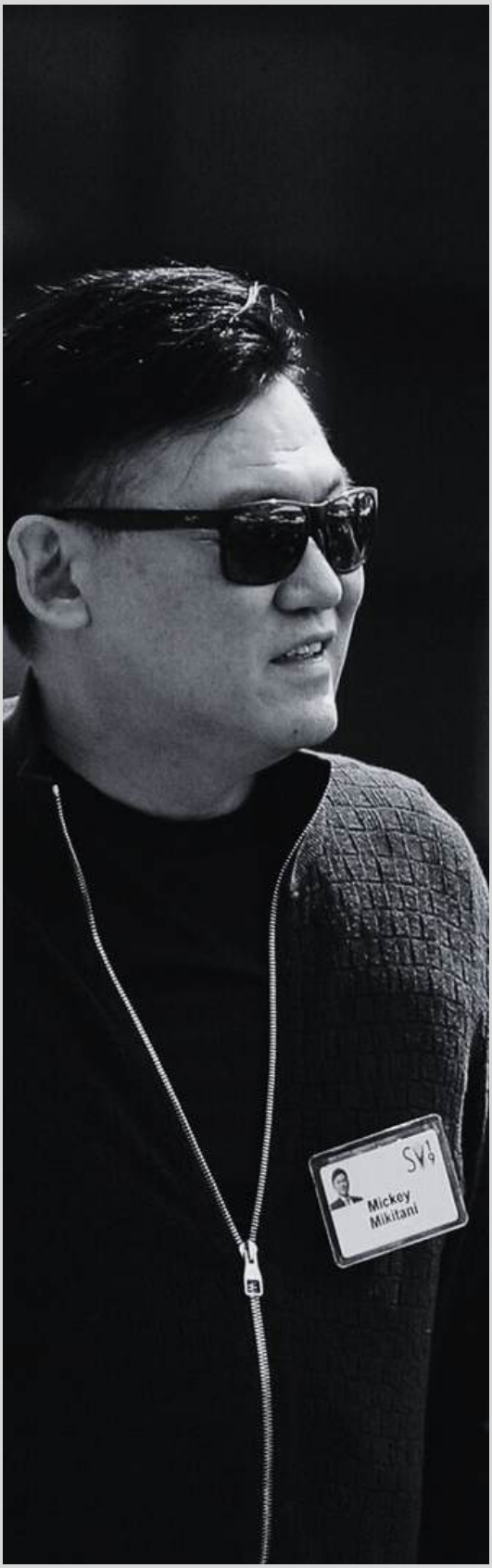
This early exposure to the West wasn't just formative; it would become foundational. Mikitani's global vision didn't appear overnight. It was baked into his upbringing. But even with this international perspective, his early career followed the well-trodden path of the Japanese elite: a commerce degree from Hitotsubashi University, followed by a stable job at the Industrial Bank of Japan. For years, he seemed destined for the secure, predictable life of a banker. But then came 1995.

The Kobe earthquake didn't just shake the foundations of his hometown, it shattered Mikitani's sense of purpose. Watching Kobe's economy collapse, he realised that Japan's economic system, with its rigid hierarchies and aversion to risk, needed a shock. The banking sector, where he had spent nearly a decade, felt increasingly irrelevant to that future. So he did what few Japanese businesspeople dared at the time: he quit.

This wasn't a romantic leap. In the Japan of the 1990s, where lifetime employment at major corporations was the pinnacle of success, Mikitani's departure was radical. His decision to start Rakuten, a name derived from the Japanese word for "optimism", was more than a business move. It was a statement. The Japanese economy, and indeed Japanese ambition, didn't have to be stuck in the past.

"HERE WAS A SYSTEM THAT COULD OFFER WOMEN FLEXIBILITY IN THE WORKFORCE, A WAY TO BALANCE PROFESSIONAL ASPIRATIONS WITH FAMILY OBLIGATIONS."

In 1997, Rakuten Ichiba launched. It started small: six employees, one server, thirteen merchants. Hardly the stuff of legend. Yet Mikitani wasn't chasing Amazon's model. While Jeff Bezos was building a company defined by relentless efficiency and scale, Mikitani envisioned something else: a virtual marketplace where small and medium-sized businesses could flourish. A kind of online bazaar, where the unique character of each merchant would shine. Rakuten Ichiba wasn't just about selling products; it was about creating an ecosystem.



This idea of an ecosystem is crucial. Mikitani didn't just want customers; he wanted members. He wasn't building a business; he was building a community. Rakuten Points, Rakuten Bank, Rakuten Travel, every new service wasn't just another revenue stream; it was a thread in an interconnected web. The more you used Rakuten, the more valuable it became to you. And the more valuable you became to Rakuten.

But Mikitani's ambitions didn't stop at Japan's borders. The real inflection point came in 2010, with what might be his most controversial and defining decision: "Englishnization." Mikitani declared that within two years, English would be the official language of Rakuten. Every meeting, every internal document, every email, English only.

It's hard to overstate how radical this was. In a country where English proficiency is notoriously low and where corporate culture tends to resist Western influence, Mikitani's decision was met with ridicule. Takanobu Ito, then president of Honda, dismissed the idea as "stupid." But Mikitani didn't flinch. His argument was simple: if Rakuten was to become a global player, English fluency wasn't an advantage, it was a necessity.

"THE MORE YOU USED RAKUTEN, THE MORE VALUABLE IT BECAME TO YOU. AND THE MORE VALUABLE YOU BECAME TO RAKUTEN."

But "Englishnization" wasn't just about language. It was about mindset. It was a direct challenge to the insularity of Japanese business. Mikitani believed Japan's future lay in embracing global competition, and he wasn't afraid to push his employees, some of whom resigned under the pressure, to get there.

This willingness to break with convention shows up in other parts of his career too. In 2011, following the Fukushima nuclear disaster, Mikitani publicly resigned from Keidanren, Japan's powerful business federation. His reason? He disagreed with its support for nuclear energy and its resistance to reform. Most Japanese CEOs would never dream of such a public break. Mikitani made the announcement on Twitter. For him, transparency and accountability weren't just buzzwords, they were weapons against the complacency he saw in Japan's establishment.

Mikitani's worldview, however, isn't just about disruption for disruption's sake. It's about contribution. He often quotes his father's belief that the most important mission of corporations is to contribute to humanity. This isn't empty rhetoric. In 2022, when Russia invaded Ukraine, Mikitani personally donated $8.7 million to the Ukrainian government. He didn't just tweet about support; he wrote a letter to Ukraine's president explaining that the world's democracies had to stand together.

And yet, Rakuten's journey hasn't been without missteps. His foray into mobile networks, with Rakuten Mobile, has been costly. Building a telecom network from scratch is capital-intensive, and Rakuten's stock price has suffered. Critics question whether Mikitani's "moonshot" projects stretch Rakuten too thin. But Mikitani remains unfazed. "If you just chase after the stock price, you'll never create something great," he once said. His ambition isn't short-term growth; it's rewriting the rules of business itself.

"MIKITANI'S WORLDVIEW ISN'T JUST ABOUT DISRUPTION FOR DISRUPTION'S SAKE. IT'S ABOUT CONTRIBUTION."

This brings us back to Mikitani's essential belief: that all concepts are relative. There is no absolute way to do things. While Japan's business world often worships at the altar of consensus and tradition, Mikitani relishes questioning assumptions. His management style is brisk, sometimes abrasive. "Speed, speed, speed," he says, because if you don't fail fast, you don't learn fast. For Mikitani, failure isn't a setback; it's feedback.

But what makes Mikitani especially compelling isn't just his strategic thinking. It's his cultural intuition. He believes the future of business lies in balancing the transformative power of the internet with the irreplaceable "human touch." As e-commerce giants race toward frictionless transactions, Mikitani talks about hospitality, omotenashi, the uniquely Japanese philosophy of care. He wants Rakuten to feel personal, not transactional. In a world of algorithms, he still bets on relationships.

So who is Hiroshi Mikitani, really? A disruptor, yes. But not a nihilistic one. His disruptions are in service of something larger: a Japan that is open, ambitious, and competitive. A Japan unafraid to speak English. A Japan that can lead on the global stage.

In an era where so many tech leaders seem driven by ego or empire-building, Mikitani's vision feels refreshingly anchored. He doesn't just want Rakuten to be big; he wants it to mean something. His narrative reminds us that the most interesting entrepreneurs aren't those who merely make billions, but those who make us rethink what business can be about.

MIKITANI WANTS RAKUTEN TO FEEL PERSONAL, NOT TRANSACTIONAL. IN A WORLD OF ALGORITHMS, HE STILL BETS ON RELATIONSHIPS.

Image: Paramount Pictures, Universal Pictures

SELL ME THIS PEN

BY PAUL ASHTON

"Sell me this pen." A simple challenge, an oft-touted phrase from the movie The Wolf of Wall Street, embodies the essence of Western sales culture: confidence, persuasion, urgency. The exercise is straightforward: create demand, frame the need, and close the deal. In the US, the right answer is aggressive and compelling. "Do you write? You do? Then you need this pen. And not just any pen, this one, because it's yours right now." A sharp smile, a firm handshake, a commission well-earned. But try that line in Japan, and the room will go quiet. Your prospect will study the pen, nod politely, and likely respond with something more measured: Who makes this pen? What is its reputation? Has my company used this brand before? Before you even begin your pitch, they will want to know why this relationship should exist at all.

Selling in Japan is not about persuasion; it is about trust. The pitch, the charm, the pressure; it all falls flat if the foundation is not in place. A deal is not made in a meeting; it is cultivated over years. And this is where so many foreign businesses fail. They enter the market believing they need better salespeople, sharper closers, a more compelling pitch. But in Japan, salesmanship is not about pushing a product. It is about proving that you, your company, and everything you represent are worthy of long-term commitment.

One of the biggest cultural mismatches is in the way sales is perceived. In the US, top salespeople are often seen as the backbone of a company, a clear path to leadership, even the CEO's chair. In Japan, however, the most respected executives do not come from sales; they come from engineering, operations, or R&D. The dominant mentality is that quality speaks for itself, that the

SELLING IN JAPAN IS NOT ABOUT PERSUASION; IT IS ABOUT TRUST.

best way to "sell" something is to make it indispensable. This thinking is particularly entrenched in Japan's IT and manufacturing sectors, where large systems integrators (SIs) dominate. Companies like NTT Data, NEC, and Fujitsu are not built on aggressive customer acquisition strategies. Instead, they are sustained by decades-long relationships with clients who trust them implicitly. Their "sales" teams do not pitch products in boardrooms; they maintain relationships over years, ensuring that contracts are renewed not because of pressure, but because of familiarity and reliability.

This customer-first mindset is so deeply ingrained that it affects every aspect of how sales operates. A single word, toraburu (trouble), can trigger an almost military-level response from a Japanese vendor. When a customer raises an issue, teams of engineers will work tirelessly to fix the problem, often without concern for cost or scope. In the West, sales agreements are bound by limitation of liability clauses, clearly defining what is and isn't covered. In Japan, there is no such hard line. The priority is the relationship, and if maintaining that requires absorbing losses, so be it.

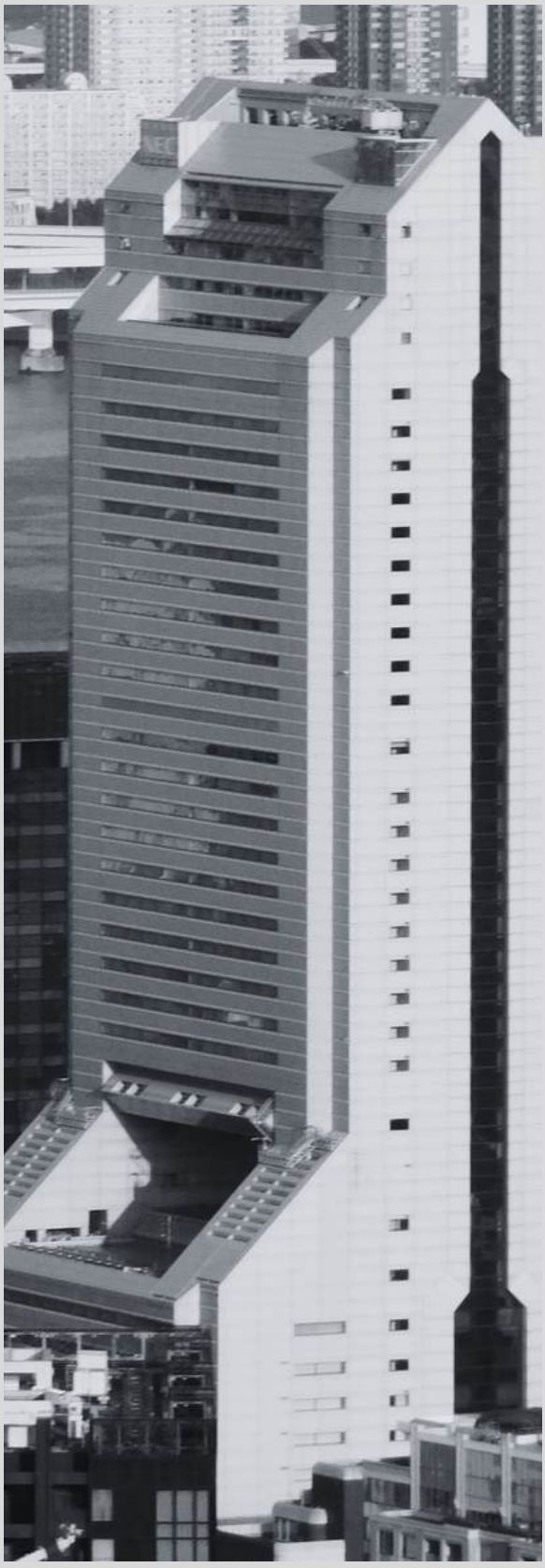
For foreign companies, this presents an immediate hurdle: how do you compete with an incumbent supplier who is willing to do whatever it takes, no matter how unreasonable the demand? If your sales strategy is based on cutting costs, being more innovative, or offering better service, you may find that none of it matters. Because in Japan, loyalty outweighs all other considerations.

THE CUSTOMER-FIRST MINDSET IS SO DEEPLY INGRAINED THAT IT AFFECTS EVERY ASPECT OF HOW SALES OPERATES.

For MNCs trying to establish a presence in Japan, the challenge is compounded by the difficulty of finding effective sales talent. It is not that Japan lacks capable professionals; rather, the best and brightest tend to gravitate toward blue-chip domestic firms rather than foreign ones. Those who do join MNCs often struggle, not because they lack skill, but because they are expected to operate in a system that is fundamentally at odds with their training. One of the biggest mistakes MNCs make is hiring based on English ability rather than business acumen. It is an understandable impulse, foreign firms need employees who can communicate with global headquarters. But there is an often-overlooked reality: there is an inverse correlation between strong English skills and strong sales ability. The reason is simple. The best Japanese salespeople are not the ones who spent years perfecting their English; they are the ones who spent years perfecting their ability to navigate Japan's intricate, relationship-driven business culture. They know when to speak, when to stay silent, how to read a room, and, most critically, how to move a deal forward without ever appearing pushy.

Another major friction point is forecasting. In Western sales culture, a missed opportunity is worse than a failed attempt, salespeople are trained to take calculated risks, to push for deals even when the outcome is uncertain. In Japan, the opposite is true. The biggest fear is not missing a deal, but being wrong about one. This creates a deep aversion to speculative forecasting. A Japanese salesperson would rather say nothing than overpromise, which often leads to MNCs being blindsided when expected deals fail to materialise. This is not dishonesty, it is cultural conditioning.

"THE BEST JAPANESE SALESPEOPLE...ARE THE ONES WHO SPENT YEARS PERFECTING THEIR ABILITY TO NAVIGATE JAPAN'S INTRICATE, RELATIONSHIP-DRIVEN BUSINESS CULTURE."



Moreover, MNCs often expect their Japanese sales teams to operate with the same sense of quarterly urgency that drives Western markets. But Japan is not a quarterly-driven culture. Long-established firms like NEC or Mitsubishi Electric are not going to force a client into a rushed decision just to meet an arbitrary three-month sales target. Japanese customers expect a different pace, one aligned with annual budget cycles and long-term strategic planning.

Despite these challenges, success in Japan is not impossible. It simply requires a different approach. Companies need to invest in cultural onboarding. It is not enough to provide product training, sales teams must be trained to understand the expectations around transparency, forecasting, and relationship management. This cannot be an afterthought. MNCs should work with experienced local staff to develop onboarding programs that bridge the gap between Western and Japanese sales philosophies. They also need to move past the fixation on English ability. The most effective salespeople are often those who are deeply embedded in the local business culture, even if they struggle to communicate with global headquarters. Hiring managers should prioritise business skills, network strength, and industry expertise over language proficiency.

Foreign companies must be strategic about executive engagement. Japanese clients are often thrilled to meet CEOs, R&D heads, or senior technical experts. They are far less interested in meeting high-ranking sales executives. Understanding these nuances can help MNCs build credibility in ways that resonate with Japanese buyers.

“DESPITE THESE CHALLENGES, SUCCESS IN JAPAN IS NOT IMPOSSIBLE. IT SIMPLY REQUIRES A DIFFERENT APPROACH.”

Patience is everything. Japan is not a market where quick wins are possible. But once trust is established, the rewards are immense. Japanese customers, once committed, are some of the most loyal in the world. The first deal may take years to close, but when it does, it is not just a contract, it is the beginning of a relationship that could last a lifetime.

And so, we come back to the pen. In the US, The Wolf of Wall Street approach works because sales is a game of opportunity, the right words, the right moment, and the deal is done. In Japan, selling the pen is different. You do not start with why they need it; you start with why they should trust you. You attend meetings. You exchange business cards with both hands. You show up with small seasonal gifts, build rapport over meals, and wait. The first sale might take months, or even years. But once made, it is not just a transaction; it is the start of a relationship, one that, if nurtured properly, will last far longer than any single deal.

The real question in Japan that should be answered is, "Why should I buy this pen from you, today, tomorrow, and ten years from now?"

“THE FIRST DEAL MAY TAKE YEARS TO CLOSE, BUT WHEN IT DOES, IT IS NOT JUST A CONTRACT, IT IS THE BEGINNING OF A RELATIONSHIP THAT COULD LAST A LIFETIME.”

Image: The National Museum of Computing

TOMORROW WORKS FOREVER

BY PAUL ASHTON

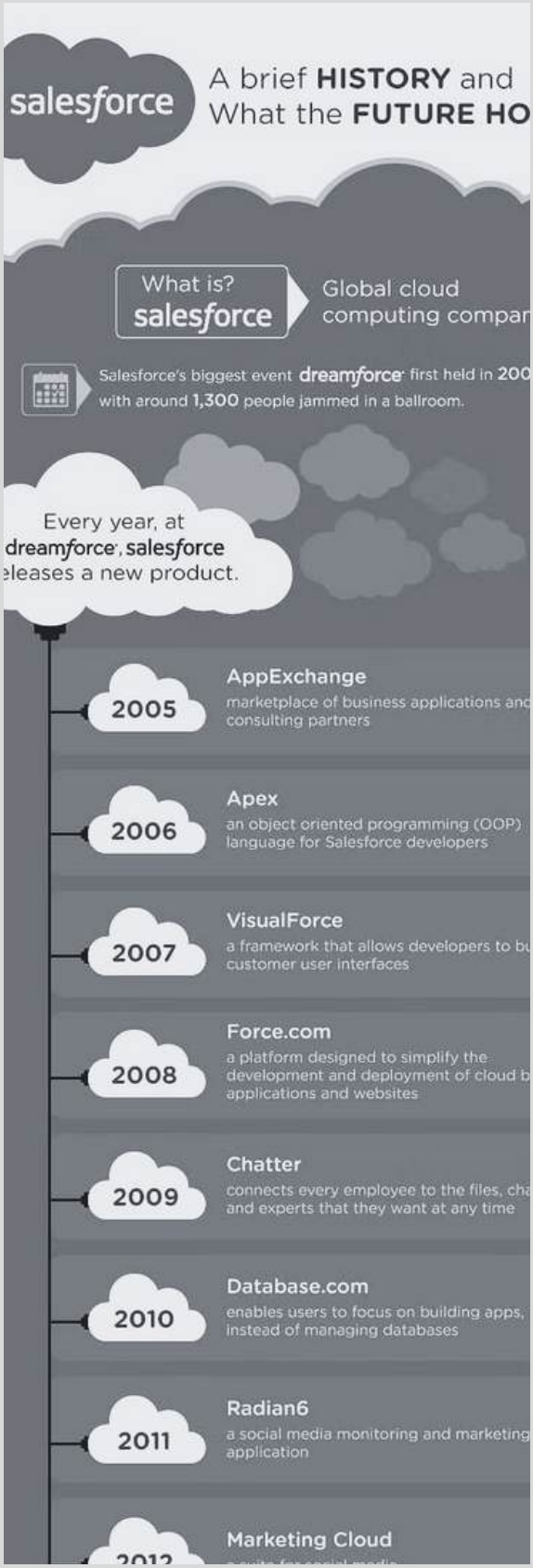
My two sons are growing up in a Japan that is shifting beneath their feet. One wants to be a diplomat, the other a programmer. A generation ago, there would have been no debate over which path made more sense. Diplomacy, stable, prestigious, a lifelong career backed by the security of government employment, was the obvious choice. Programming, on the other hand, would have felt like a gamble, a role for freelancers and startup dreamers, lacking stability or long-term certainty. But today, the landscape has reversed. The world no longer guarantees stability to those who play it safe, and those who master AI, data, and automation will define the future. What was once seen as risk now looks like the surest bet, and the institutions that once promised longevity are struggling to adapt.

Walk through Tokyo, and you can feel this contradiction everywhere. High-tech automation in stores, yet government offices still run on stamps. AI-powered robotics on factory floors, yet rigid corporate hierarchies slow decision-making to a crawl. The city is a living paradox, caught between an old world built on stability and a new one demanding constant reinvention. In years past, Japan's work culture was a promise, loyalty would be rewarded, expertise would be built slowly over decades, and security was ensured for those who followed the path laid before them. But AI is not just another technological shift. It is changing the very nature of employment itself, and Japan is faced with a choice: embrace it and reshape its workforce accordingly, or resist it and risk slow economic decline.

"WHAT WAS ONCE SEEN AS RISK NOW LOOKS LIKE THE SUREST BET"

The global job market is already shifting at an unprecedented pace. Look at Salesforce, just last month, the tech giant cut more than a thousand employees while hiring two thousand AI-driven sales specialists. The logic is clear: AI is not just an efficiency tool; it is reshaping entire industries, reallocating human labour on a scale not seen since the Industrial Revolution. A single AI-driven system can now do the work of dozens of employees, without fatigue, without error, without a salary. And Salesforce is not alone. Meta has slashed more than 20,000 jobs, calling it the "year of efficiency," a euphemism for restructuring around AI. Amazon is automating its warehouses at a pace that makes human labour increasingly redundant. Even JPMorgan is shifting entire divisions to AI-powered risk analysis systems. The workforce is being rewritten, and Japan, already facing a severe labour shortage, does not have the luxury of ignoring this shift.

By 2030, Japan will have 3.4 million fewer workers. By 2040, that number will reach 11 million. The math is unsustainable. Without a full embrace of AI-driven productivity, entire industries will face collapse, not decades from now, but within the careers of the young people entering the workforce today. Yet, Japan hesitates. There is a deep-rooted discomfort with disrupting traditional career paths, and an even deeper anxiety about AI replacing human roles. The country has always prided itself on stability and lifelong employment, and AI challenges that at its core. The very idea that a machine could do the job of a seasoned professional, whether in finance, law, logistics, or diplomacy, feels at odds with the cultural value placed on expertise built over years, even decades.



"A SINGLE AI-DRIVEN SYSTEM CAN NOW DO THE WORK OF DOZENS OF EMPLOYEES, WITHOUT FATIGUE, WITHOUT ERROR, WITHOUT A SALARY."

The irony is that Japan should be uniquely suited to lead in AI adoption. The country has long been a pioneer in automation, with companies like FANUC and Kawasaki Heavy Industries at the forefront of robotics innovation. But AI is not just about robots on factory floors, it is about white-collar jobs, customer service, logistics, and even creative industries. And that is where the resistance emerges. The idea of a robot assembling a car is uncontroversial. The idea of an AI replacing a diplomat or a lawyer is something else entirely.

But the transition is already happening, whether Japan acknowledges it or not. Legal firms are cutting junior staff as AI-powered contract review software takes over routine work. Financial institutions are using AI-driven risk assessment models that outperform human analysts. Even the entertainment industry is being disrupted, with AI-generated anime scripts and synthetic voice acting beginning to replace traditional roles in storytelling and production. The most striking transformation, however, is in logistics. With a severe shortage of truck drivers, Japan is exploring AI-driven delivery systems, including a proposed "conveyor belt road" between Tokyo and Osaka, where autonomous trucks would transport goods with minimal human intervention. If successful, it will not just change logistics, it will prove that AI can replace entire categories of work at scale.

"BUT AI IS NOT JUST ABOUT ROBOTS ON FACTORY FLOORS, IT IS ABOUT WHITE-COLLAR JOBS, CUSTOMER SERVICE, LOGISTICS, AND EVEN CREATIVE INDUSTRIES."

The real issue isn't whether AI will take over jobs, it already is. The real question is whether Japan will prepare its workforce for the transition. Right now, too many companies see AI as a way to cut costs rather than as a tool to enhance their workforce. The conversation must change. AI is not just a replacement for workers; it is a tool that, when used correctly, can elevate them into more creative, strategic, and dynamic roles.

Education must be the first frontier of this transition. AI, coding, and data analysis cannot remain niche skills; they must be foundational. Japan's education system still prioritizes rote memorization and rigid testing over critical thinking and adaptability, the exact skills that will be most valuable in an AI-driven world. If the country does not produce a workforce capable of working alongside AI, it will not matter how advanced its technology becomes. There will be no one ready to use it.

For those already in the workforce, reskilling must become a national priority. Companies should not be given the choice to ignore it. If AI is replacing jobs, there must be a clear pathway to new roles. Every major company integrating AI should have mandatory retraining programs. Instead of eliminating employees, they should be moving them into higher-value work, roles that require human intuition, problem-solving, and creative insight.

Beyond education and training, Japan's corporate culture must evolve. The slow, hierarchical decision-making process that defines many of its major corporations is incompatible with the speed of AI adoption. The traditional seniority-based promotion system, where age trumps ability, must be abandoned in favor of a skill-based, meritocratic approach. AI-driven industries will not wait for outdated structures to catch up. The companies that embrace rapid adaptation will survive; those that do not will collapse.

"EDUCATION MUST BE THE FIRST FRONTIER OF THIS TRANSITION. AI, CODING, AND DATA ANALYSIS CANNOT REMAIN NICHE SKILLS."

Government policy must also move faster. Japan's AI regulations remain cautious, but caution is just another word for stagnation. The government should not just be reacting to AI's risks but proactively enabling AI adoption. Companies that invest in AI workforce training should receive tax incentives. AI-driven infrastructure projects, like the autonomous trucking system, should be fast-tracked. Safety nets must be built for displaced workers, but they should be built with the assumption that new AI-driven jobs will replace old ones, not with the expectation that people will return to outdated roles.

Hesitation will not stop the world from moving forward. The industries that embrace AI are already outpacing those that resist. The companies that hesitate are already being left behind. Japan's history is proof that reinvention is possible, it has done it before, in the post-war economic miracle, in the technological boom of the 1980s. But AI is not just another industrial shift. It is a rewriting of the entire workforce, and Japan is running out of time to adapt.

My sons will enter a world very different from the one I grew up in. Their futures, like Japan's, will be shaped by the choices made today. If the country can move beyond its fears and embrace AI not as a threat, but as a force for reinvention, then the next generation will thrive. If not, they will be forced to build their futures elsewhere. AI is not waiting for Japan. The only question is whether Japan will rise to meet it.

SAFETY NETS...SHOULD BE BUILT WITH THE ASSUMPTION THAT NEW AI-DRIVEN JOBS WILL REPLACE OLD ONES.

Image: Cafe Sepia

REVIVING RETRO

BY PAUL ASHTON

When I was growing up, retro meant the 1950s. It was diners with jukeboxes, poodle skirts, and the glossy idealism of a postwar era that seemed impossibly far away. For my generation, “retro” summoned images of black-and-white televisions and crooners serenading under neon lights. It felt distinct, a time before our time. Yet, in what feels like a blink, the period I was born into, what I considered ordinary, has now been rebranded as “peak retro” for younger generations. And nowhere is this more evident than in Japan’s growing fascination with the Shōwa era.

This isn’t just a nostalgic glance backward. It’s a cultural movement, where young Japanese, many born after the Shōwa period ended in 1989, find something compelling in a time they never lived through. There’s a deep irony here. The very era that once symbolised rapid economic growth and modernisation now represents a form of simplicity, warmth, and analogue charm that feels almost revolutionary in today’s hyper-digital world. For Gen Z, Shōwa retro isn’t just a style; it’s a subcultural statement.

The Shōwa era itself, spanning from 1926 to 1989, is vast and complex. But when young people in Japan talk about Shōwa retro, they often mean the postwar decades, the 1950s through the 1980s. These were years of transformation, marked by hardship and hope, where Japan rebuilt itself from the ashes of war into an economic powerhouse. What’s fascinating is that the nostalgia today isn’t necessarily for the hardship but for the aesthetic and emotional residue it left behind, retro kissaten (traditional cafés), soft city pop melodies, and streets lined with vending machines selling glass-bottled drinks.

“WHAT I CONSIDERED ORDINARY, HAS NOW BEEN REBRANDED AS “PEAK RETRO” FOR YOUNGER GENERATIONS.”

As a child, I remember looking at the 1950s as an era that belonged to a different world altogether. But for today's youth in Japan, the late Shōwa years, particularly the 1980s, are the new "vintage." The bubble economy years, with their shoulder-padded fashion, bright neon lights, and optimistic consumer culture, are seen as stylishly retro. And the fact that this period is now considered "old school" by young people makes me acutely aware of how the meaning of retro shifts with generational perspective.

The current Shōwa retro boom isn't confined to Japan either. Thailand has developed its own enthusiasm for Shōwa anime, and South Korea has embraced Shōwa-era city pop music. The once-overlooked sounds of artists like Meiko Nakahara and Saki Kubota are now playing on loop for a generation that discovers these tunes through TikTok rather than cassette tapes. "Mayonaka no Door" and "Plastic Love," two quintessential city pop tracks from the late '70s and '80s, have become viral hits, sparking dance trends and remixes that seamlessly blend the past with the present. These songs resonate not because of their age but because of their timeless melodies and the yearning they carry, a yearning that transcends decades.

But why now? Why this particular fixation on the Shōwa era among young Japanese? It would be easy to chalk it up to a simple longing for a time perceived as more authentic or unburdened by today's anxieties. Yet, the allure seems deeper than that. In an age where everything is instantly accessible, where digital interactions dominate, and where social media dictates trends, the analogue charm of the Shōwa period offers something rare: slowness. The soft crackle of vinyl, the grainy texture of disposable cameras like Fujicolor Utsurundesu, and the warm glow of retro cafés offer a tactile experience that digital culture simply cannot replicate.

"WHY THIS PARTICULAR FIXATION ON THE SHŌWA ERA AMONG YOUNG JAPANESE?"

There's also a sense of unity in this shared nostalgia. Even though many of these young enthusiasts never lived through the Shōwa years, their embrace of its culture creates a bridge between generations. For older generations, it's a chance to reflect on a past that was complex and sometimes harsh, but also filled with optimism. For younger ones, it's a glimpse into a world where dreams of prosperity were still unfolding, where people believed the future could only get better.

Films like Always: Sunset on Third Street (2005) have further fueled this boom. The movie paints an idealised picture of everyday life in the late 1950s, a time when Tokyo Tower was rising as a symbol of hope. It taps into the collective memory of a nation that was rebuilding, capturing the warmth of human connections amid economic uncertainty. And it's not just films, anime like Crayon Shin-chan: The Storm Called: The Adult Empire Strikes Back (2001) explores Shōwa nostalgia with a sharp commentary on how adults yearn for the simplicity of their childhood. The film suggests that this longing can be so powerful it threatens to trap us in the past, raising questions about how nostalgia shapes our present choices.

This cultural moment isn't limited to media. Shōwa retro cafés have become popular hangouts, offering menus with cream sodas served in floral glassware reminiscent of the 1960s. Vintage shopping streets, or shōtengai, have seen a revival, with young shoppers hunting for fashion items their grandparents might have worn. Shoulder pads, once the pinnacle of bubble-era fashion, are now considered stylish again. Even the Seiko-chan cut, a hairstyle popularised by idol Seiko Matsuda in the 1980s, has made a comeback among teenage girls in Japan and China.

IT'S A GLIMPSE INTO A WORLD WHERE DREAMS OF PROSPERITY WERE STILL UNFOLDING, WHERE PEOPLE BELIEVED THE FUTURE COULD ONLY GET BETTER.

Such trends suggest that Shōwa retro is not simply about aesthetic choices; it's about embodying a different mindset. The Shōwa period, especially its later years, represented a time when economic growth felt inevitable, when people aspired to a standard happiness defined by tangible markers: a car, a colour television, and an air conditioner. But what happens when those dreams are already realized? For today's youth, who grew up with material abundance, there's a challenge in finding their own definitions of happiness. The Shōwa era, with its optimism and clear sense of purpose, offers a model, even if only a romanticised one.

In some ways, this nostalgia also serves as a critique of the present. The Shōwa era wasn't without its flaws, industrial pollution, intense social competition, and economic disparities were rampant. Yet, what seems to be remembered now is a time when the future seemed full of possibilities. That sense of forward momentum is something that feels missing in today's Japan, where the population is aging, birthrates are declining, and economic growth has slowed. For a generation facing an uncertain future, the past, paradoxically, feels like a more hopeful place.

There's also an intriguing global dimension to this trend. The Shōwa aesthetic's rise on platforms like TikTok and Instagram shows how nostalgia is no longer a purely local phenomenon. Retro is now curated and performed for a global audience. Shōwa's appeal is aesthetic, yes, but it's also experiential. Young people seek the analogue imperfection of vinyl records and Polaroids because these things feel real in a world saturated with digital perfection. They crave the messy, the tactile, and the slow, things that the Shōwa period, with its consumer goods still full of novelty, represented.

"IN SOME WAYS, THIS NOSTALGIA ALSO SERVES AS A CRITIQUE OF THE PRESENT."

What strikes me most is how this fascination with Shōwa retro underscores a shifting relationship with time itself. Retro no longer feels like a static look back at a neatly packaged past. Instead, it's fluid, overlapping with contemporary sensibilities. Neo Shōwa, a term used to describe the blending of Shōwa aesthetics with Reiwa era culture, highlights this fusion. It's nostalgia with a modern twist, where old and new co-exist comfortably.

When I reflect on how retro once meant the 1950s to me, it becomes clear that "retro" is always a moving target, defined as much by the desires of the present as by the realities of the past. For Japan's youth, Shōwa retro isn't about restoring the past but reimagining it. They are reconstructing a time they never knew, blending it with their contemporary identities. This process of selective remembrance is as much about crafting a narrative for the future as it is about celebrating history.

The resurgence of Shōwa retro raises questions that extend beyond Japan. In a global culture obsessed with speed and innovation, what does it mean when the past becomes aspirational? Is it merely comfort-seeking in uncertain times, or is it a subtle form of resistance, a way to reclaim control over the narrative of progress? After all, retro isn't just about aesthetics; it's about values, about the stories we tell ourselves to make sense of where we are and where we're heading.

As I watch this Shōwa retro boom unfold, I'm struck by its quiet power. It's more than just a trend; it's a conversation across time, a negotiation between memory and desire. The past, it seems, still has lessons to offer, not as a place to return to, but as a lens through which to see the future.

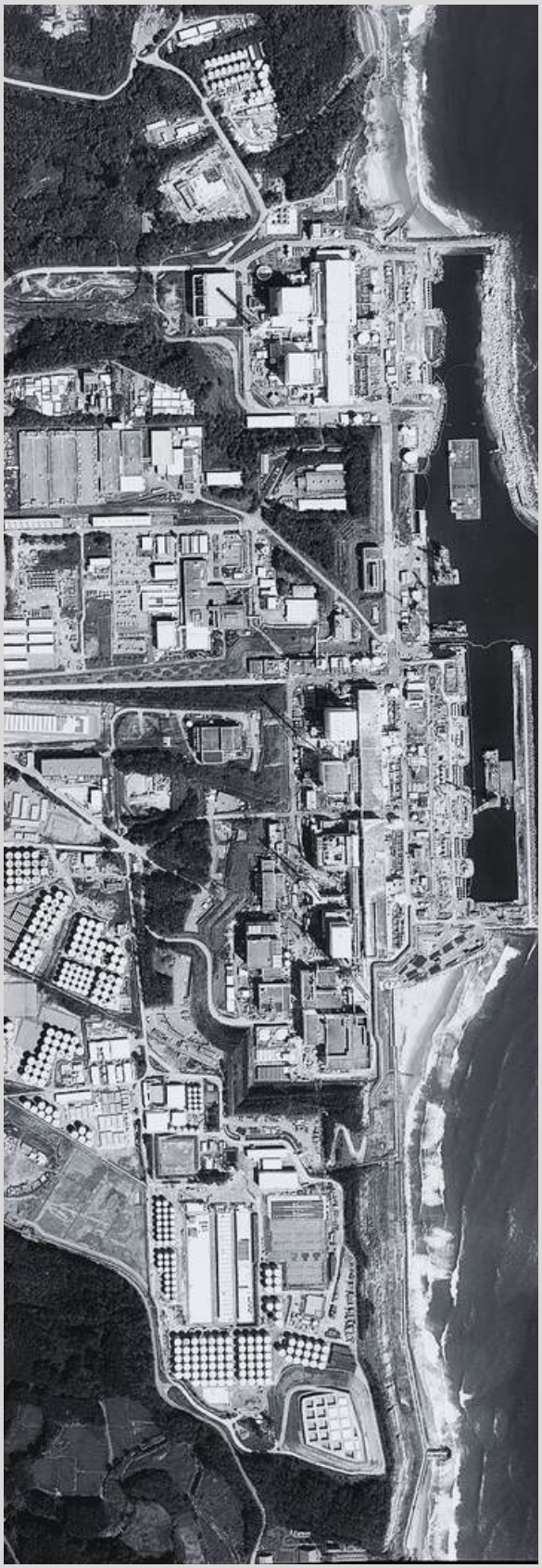
""RETRO" IS ALWAYS A MOVING TARGET, DEFINED AS MUCH BY THE DESIRES OF THE PRESENT AS BY THE REALITIES OF THE PAST."

Image: Audible.com

NOW READ THIS! BENDING ADVERSITY

BY PAUL ASHTON

David Pilling's Bending Adversity is one of those rare books that attempts the impossible and somehow gets remarkably close to succeeding. How do you distil the complexities of a nation like Japan, so often misunderstood, fetishized, or flattened into neat cultural clichés, into something coherent, accessible, and honest? The usual tropes of Japan as the land of stoic efficiency, endless bowing, and quirky eccentricities are easy to default to. But Pilling refuses the easy route. His work is not another wide-eyed Western gaze marvelling at the exotic. Instead, Bending Adversity reads like an exercise in nuance, an invitation to see Japan not as a monolith of mystery, but as a nation shaped by contradictions, crises, and an enduring spirit of reinvention.



What stands out in Pilling's approach is his refusal to pick sides. This is no love letter nor a harsh critique; it's an honest conversation with a nation that remains both deeply introspective and outwardly cautious. His narrative begins in the shadow of one of Japan's most defining contemporary disasters, the 2011 earthquake, tsunami, and Fukushima nuclear meltdown. This tragedy is not merely a backdrop but a lens through which Pilling interrogates the structural, cultural, and political fault lines that define modern Japan. The catastrophe exposed vulnerabilities many assumed Japan had long overcome: systemic failures in the nuclear industry, rigid management hierarchies, and a troubling complacency bred by postwar economic success. Yet, as Pilling shows, it also revealed Japan's astonishing capacity for resilience, a nation bending, but never breaking, in the face of adversity.

"THIS IS NO LOVE LETTER NOR A HARSH CRITIQUE."

Japan's contradictions have always been part of its allure and frustration. Pilling spends a significant portion of his book wrestling with Japan's relationship to the West. He reminds us that Japan's modern identity is haunted by its late arrival to the global stage, dragged into international trade by Commodore Perry's black ships in 1853. The encounter with the West was as much a reckoning as it was a revelation. Japan modernised rapidly, modelling itself on European powers, only to discover that mimicry did not guarantee equality. The West, in its colonial arrogance, would not accept an Asian power as its equal. Japan's pivot from modernisation to militarism was not an inexplicable deviation but a desperate assertion of sovereignty in a world where survival seemed to demand imperial aggression.

Pilling's exploration of this historical moment is where his balanced approach shines. He neither excuses Japan's wartime atrocities nor simplifies the factors that led to them. He points out that the United States, in its postwar occupation, helped cultivate Japan's selective memory by shielding the emperor from responsibility and suppressing discussion of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This amnesia is not uniquely Japanese. Pilling deftly connects Japan's struggle to confront its past with similar tendencies in Western nations, whether it's Britain's evasions about its colonial legacy or America's uneasy reckonings with its own imperial interventions. The point is clear: national narratives are always partial, always curated, and always contested.

Pilling's ability to connect these grand historical and political narratives with everyday cultural observations makes Bending Adversity especially compelling. His anecdotes about Japanese life,

"THE ENCOUNTER WITH THE WEST WAS AS MUCH A RECKONING AS IT WAS A REVELATION."

supermarket staff risking injury to save neatly arranged soy sauce bottles during an earthquake or the enduring commitment to heated toilet seats despite energy shortages, reveal a society where order, ritual, and collective responsibility matter deeply. But Pilling is too astute to leave these as mere quirks of an "exotic" culture. He probes deeper, asking what these behaviours say about Japan's understanding of self, society, and survival.

A recurring theme in the book is Japan's obsession with its own uniqueness, a belief often encapsulated in the concept of nihonjinron. Pilling, however, challenges this narrative of exceptionalism. His conversations with figures like Masahiko Fujiwara reveal a tension between pride in Japan's distinctiveness and the reality that many of these so-called unique traits are simply cultural variations on universal human experiences. Fujiwara's insistence that Japanese rain is somehow fundamentally different from British rain is both amusing and revealing. It speaks to a deeper anxiety: the need to assert identity in a world where Japan's place has always been contested.

Pilling is at his best when he complicates this discourse on uniqueness. He argues that Japan's perceived difference has often been shaped more by Western projections than by any inherent cultural otherness. After all, every nation is unique. There is only one India, one Russia, one Egypt. The West's fascination with Japan's supposed inscrutability says as much about Western desires for the "other" as it does about Japan itself. Pilling's point is subtle but crucial: Japan is not incomprehensible; it is simply a nation like any other, grappling with its history, contradictions, and future.

"FUJIWARA'S INSISTENCE THAT JAPANESE RAIN IS SOMEHOW FUNDAMENTALLY DIFFERENT FROM BRITISH RAIN IS BOTH AMUSING AND REVEALING."

The sections of the book that explore Japan's economic trajectory are particularly illuminating. For much of the late 20th century, Japan was seen as an economic juggernaut, its corporate giants reshaping global markets. But the burst of the asset bubble in the early 1990s plunged the nation into decades of stagnation. Pilling links this economic malaise to deeper social issues. The rigid corporate structures that had once underpinned Japan's success became liabilities. The promise of lifetime employment evaporated, and a generation of "freeters", young people stuck in low-paid, precarious jobs, emerged. This is where Pilling's journalistic instincts shine; he captures the disillusionment of a generation that grew up believing in stability only to find it out of reach.

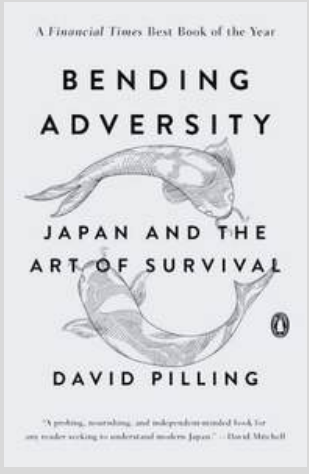
Yet, even here, Pilling resists despair. He sees potential in this new generation's refusal to adhere to outdated norms. The "salaryman" culture, with its exhausting demands and rigid hierarchies, no longer holds the same appeal. There is a quiet revolution happening among Japan's youth, a willingness to pursue alternative paths, challenge gender norms, and redefine success. For women especially, this shift is profound. Pilling highlights how deeply entrenched gender inequalities persist in Japanese society, but he also notes the rising resistance. Fewer women are marrying, more are entering the workforce, and some are openly rejecting the limited roles traditionally available to them.

This generational shift is crucial because it signals Japan's potential to adapt without losing itself. Pilling seems cautiously optimistic. Japan's demographic challenges, an ageing population, shrinking workforce, are often framed as existential crises. Yet Pilling suggests that these very challenges could force the kind of social and economic innovations Japan needs. The disaster at Fukushima was a wake-up call, exposing the limits of the status quo. But it also revealed the strengths of Japanese society: its communal resilience, its capacity for self-reflection, and its refusal to be defined by a single narrative of decline.

"THERE IS A QUIET REVOLUTION HAPPENING AMONG JAPAN'S YOUTH, A WILLINGNESS TO PURSUE ALTERNATIVE PATHS, CHALLENGE GENDER NORMS, AND REDEFINE SUCCESS."

Pilling's handling of Japan's historical memory is where the book truly earns its title. Bending adversity is not just about recovering from earthquakes or economic slumps; it's about how a nation contorts itself around the weight of its past. Japan's wartime history continues to strain relations with its neighbours. Pilling is clear-eyed about the failures of Japan's political class to fully confront this past. Yet, he also points out the complexities of this failure. Japan's democracy allows for a plurality of voices, including those of nationalists and revisionists. While these voices often dominate public discourse, they do not represent the totality of Japanese sentiment. Many Japanese intellectuals, educators, and ordinary citizens have worked tirelessly to ensure that the darker chapters of their history are not forgotten.

In the end, Pilling leaves us with a Japan that is neither a puzzle to be solved nor a model to be emulated. It is a country like any other, complex, flawed, resilient. Bending Adversity invites us to see Japan not through the lens of fascination or fear, but with understanding. And perhaps that is the most radical thing of all.



- Title: Bending Adversity: Japan and the Art of Survival
- Author: David Pilling
- Genre: Narrative Nonfiction / Business & Economics
- Subject: Japan's Resilience and Economic Challenges
- Publisher: Penguin Books
- Original Publication Date: 2014
- Summary: Bending Adversity explores Japan's ability to endure economic stagnation, political shifts, and natural disasters. Drawing on history, interviews, and economic analysis, David Pilling examines the contradictions of a nation balancing resilience and inertia..

"PILLING IS CLEAR-EYED ABOUT THE FAILURES OF JAPAN'S POLITICAL CLASS TO FULLY CONFRONT THIS PAST."

Image: Eater

OBSESSION THAT ALTERS KNOWN UNDERSTANDING

BY PAUL ASHTON

I remember the first time I went to Akihabara years ago. I was walking down the neon-drenched streets on a Friday evening after a meeting at Lenovo, and around me, I was surrounded by a world unlike anywhere else. Maid cafés with young women in Victorian-style aprons calling out to passersby, electronic shops blasting anime theme songs, and walls covered in larger-than-life posters of blue-haired girls with oversized eyes. Inside the multi-storey buildings, aisles overflowed with manga, limited-edition figurines, and rows of gacha machines dispensing plastic trinkets that fans collect with almost religious devotion. As a non-otaku outsider, it seemed chaotic, obsessive, or even bizarre. But to the millions who identify as otaku, Akihabara is holy ground. Its the home to a Japanese subculture so intricate and financially potent, but yet so often misunderstood.

The word "otaku" once carried a stigma in Japan, evoking images of reclusive young men obsessing over fictional characters in dark rooms, detached from society. It was not a word anyone wanted to be associated with. In the early 1980s, it was almost an insult, a way to describe someone so consumed by their interests, whether anime, manga, or video games, that they seemed disconnected from reality. And in 1989, the term reached a kind of cultural breaking point when Tsutomu Miyazaki, a serial killer later dubbed “The Otaku Murderer,” was found with a collection of grotesque anime and horror videos. The media latched onto this, painting otaku culture as something deviant, something dangerous. The stereotype of the unwashed, socially awkward, possibly criminal anime fan was born and, for a long time, the label of "otaku" carried the weight of shame.

“AS A NON-OTAKU OUTSIDER, IT SEEMED CHAOTIC, OBSESSIVE, OR EVEN BIZARRE.”

But something changed. It did not happen overnight, nor was it the result of any one movement. It was more of a slow cultural shift, a gradual realisation that the obsessive energy of otaku was not just a fringe phenomenon, but a force capable of shaping entire industries. The term itself started losing its stigma, first among fans who reclaimed it, then among mainstream society as it became clear that otaku culture was not some dark subversion of social norms, it was an economy, a fandom, a global movement. Today, in Japan, self-identifying as an otaku is almost casual. In a 2013 survey of over 137,000 teenagers, 43% openly embraced some form of otaku identity. On the other side of the Pacific, a 2022 study found that 34% of Gen Z Americans, about 15 million people, considered themselves anime otaku. Somehow, the thing that was once seen as a symptom of social dysfunction had become a mainstream, even aspirational, identity.

The sheer financial gravity of otaku culture is something few predicted. Anime, manga, and gaming, once regarded as disposable entertainment, have become pillars of a vast commercial empire. Japan's anime industry alone is valued at over $19 billion, a number that only hints at the full scope of otaku spending. Because this is not just about watching anime or reading manga, it is about total immersion. The purchase of CDs, limited-edition figurines, exclusive merchandise, photoshoot albums, themed experiences, streaming online events, etc. It is about buying into a world completely. Take idol otaku, for instance, fans of J-pop idols who pour thousands of dollars into concerts, fan meet-and-greets, and multiple copies of the same CD just to increase their chances of getting a ticket to an event. There is an almost ritualistic devotion to it, an understanding that participating in the economy of your obsession is part of what makes you a true fan.

"THE THING THAT WAS ONCE SEEN AS A SYMPTOM OF SOCIAL DYSFUNCTION HAD BECOME MAINSTREAM."

And yet, despite the commercialisation, the essence of otaku culture is not rooted in consumerism alone. It is about world-building. Not just the worlds created in anime and manga, but the worlds fans create for themselves. The conventions, the cosplay, the online forums where every minor detail of a fictional universe is discussed with the intensity of academic discourse. It is a culture that thrives on specificity, on the joy of knowing every obscure reference and finding others who speak the same language. It is why so many otaku spaces, whether in Tokyo's Akihabara or in online communities, feel like secret societies, places where the outside world fades away, and only the shared obsession remains.

What makes otaku culture so fascinating is the way it blurs the line between fiction and reality. There are anime fans, and then there are those who live through their favourite characters. Some form deep emotional attachments to fictional figures, engaging in "2D love" where a character from an anime or game becomes as real to them as any human relationship. To outsiders, it seems delusional, but is it really so different from the way some people idolise celebrities or sports figures? The only difference is that otaku are aware of the artificiality of their devotion, they lean into it, play with it, turn it into an art form. It is the same impulse that fuels the rise of VTubers, digital avatars controlled by real people, creating parasocial relationships that feel startlingly intimate. These virtual idols earn millions in donations from fans who see them not as mere characters, but as entities they can interact with, support, and even love. The technology behind them, motion capture, AI-assisted voice modulation, only deepens the immersion.

"WHAT MAKES OTAKU CULTURE SO FASCINATING IS THE WAY IT BLURS THE LINE BETWEEN FICTION AND REALITY."

And if immersion is the heart of otaku culture, then Akihabara is its sacred ground. More than just a shopping district, Akihabara is a pilgrimage site, a living monument to the culture it represents. It is where the boundaries between anime, gaming, and reality dissolve, where tourists and locals alike come to lose themselves in endless floors of collectibles, arcades, and themed cafés. Foreign visitors, drawn in by their love of anime, flood the district in search of a tangible connection to the media that shaped their childhoods. And Japan, long attuned to the economic potential of fandom, has embraced this phenomenon. Cities across the country have begun leveraging anime tourism, with locations featured in popular series experiencing surges in visitors. The term “content tourism” now appears in academic studies, dissecting the way fictional narratives drive real-world travel.

But for all its influence, otaku culture is not without its contradictions. The industries it fuels often operate under conditions that border on exploitation. Many animators, despite working on billion-dollar franchises, earn shockingly low wages. The idol industry, with its strict rules on dating and personal conduct, maintains a level of control that would be unthinkable in Western entertainment. And within otaku media itself, problematic tropes persist, hypersexualised depictions, idealised female characters crafted for male consumption, narratives that reinforce outdated gender norms. As otaku culture becomes more global, it is being forced to confront these issues, to evolve in ways that do not alienate the diverse audience it has accumulated.

“CITIES ACROSS THE COUNTRY HAVE BEGUN LEVERAGING ANIME TOURISM, WITH LOCATIONS FEATURED IN POPULAR SERIES EXPERIENCING SURGES IN VISITORS.”

Yet, to reduce otaku culture to its excesses would be to miss the point. At its core, it is about passion. It is about the joy of knowing something deeply, of caring about something so intensely that it becomes part of your identity. It is the thrill of attending Comiket and sifting through thousands of self-published works. It is the hours spent perfecting a cosplay outfit, ensuring every detail is accurate. It is the shared language of references, inside jokes, and deep-cut trivia that instantly connects strangers across the world.

And perhaps, in a world that increasingly demands cynicism, there is something beautiful in that level of devotion. To be an otaku is to engage with art without irony, to embrace obsession without shame. It is to understand that sometimes, the things we love are more than just entertainment, they are entire universes waiting to be explored. And for those who find solace in those worlds, the line between fiction and reality has never really mattered.

"OTAKU CULTURE...S ABOUT THE JOY OF KNOWING SOMETHING DEEPLY, OF CARING ABOUT SOMETHING SO INTENSELY THAT IT BECOMES PART OF YOUR IDENTITY."

Image: Lifestyle Guide

JAPAN BUSINESS ETIQUETTE 101 FOR NEWBIES

BY PAUL ASHTON

Arriving in Japan for business can be an exhilarating experience, until the moment you realise that what works elsewhere may not quite translate here. Japan operates on a deeply ingrained system of etiquette, where respect, hierarchy, and subtlety dictate interactions. The unspoken rules can be just as important as the spoken ones, and a minor misstep can make all the difference in how you are perceived. Here are five key areas where newcomers often struggle, and how to navigate them with confidence.

The Business Card Ritual (Meishi Exchange)

In Japan, a business card is not just a piece of stationery; it represents one's professional identity and status. The exchange of business cards, known as meishi koukan, follows a specific protocol. The first mistake many newcomers make is treating the process casually, grabbing a card with one hand, barely looking at it, or worse, stuffing it into a pocket.

Instead, the correct approach is to present your card with both hands, ensuring that the text faces the recipient. When receiving a card, do so with both hands and take a moment to examine it carefully before placing it into a cardholder. Writing on a business card in front of the giver is considered rude, and placing it in your back pocket signals a lack of respect. While these details may seem minor, they set the tone for the rest of your business interactions.

"THE UNSPOKEN RULES CAN BE JUST AS IMPORTANT AS THE SPOKEN ONES"

Bowing: More Than Just a Gesture
Bowing is one of the most visible aspects of Japanese etiquette, yet many newcomers either overdo it or fail to do it appropriately. Bowing too shallowly in formal settings can seem dismissive, while an overly deep bow in a casual setting may come across as awkward. The key is to understand context.

A standard business greeting typically requires a bow of around 30 degrees. For more formal situations or when greeting a senior executive, a deeper bow of 45 degrees is appropriate. The safest strategy is to mirror the other person's bow, matching their depth and duration. Handshakes are becoming more common in international business settings, but they should never replace a bow entirely. If a handshake is offered, a slight bow beforehand or afterward helps maintain cultural balance.

The Nuanced Language of "Yes" and "No"
One of the more challenging aspects of Japanese business culture is that a direct "no" is rarely given. Japanese communication tends to be indirect, with an emphasis on maintaining harmony rather than outright refusal. If a colleague responds to a request with "That may be difficult" or "We will consider it," this often means "no" in a more diplomatic form.

Understanding these nuances is crucial to avoiding misinterpretations. Long pauses, vague responses, or statements such as "That is an interesting idea" without further elaboration should be taken as signals that the proposal is unlikely to move forward. Learning to read between the lines and paying attention to tone and context will help prevent misunderstandings.

"THE SAFEST STRATEGY IS TO MIRROR THE OTHER PERSON'S BOW, MATCHING THEIR DEPTH AND DURATION"

Drinking Etiquette and the Role of the Nomikai

In Japan, some of the most important business discussions take place outside the office, particularly during nomikai, group drinking sessions at izakaya or restaurants. These gatherings are more than just social events; they serve as a way to strengthen relationships and break down formal barriers. However, they come with their own set of unwritten rules.

It is considered impolite to pour your own drink; instead, colleagues pour for each other, and reciprocating is expected. When someone senior offers a drink, declining outright can be seen as a rejection of goodwill. While it is not necessary to drink excessively, participation, even if only with a symbolic sip, is generally appreciated. That said, while some colleagues may become uninhibited during these events, maintaining a level of composure is advisable. Regardless of what is said or done, nomikai conversations are understood to be separate from formal workplace interactions.

Silence as a Form of Communication

Many newcomers from more conversational cultures feel an urge to fill silence with continuous dialogue. However, in Japan, silence is not a sign of awkwardness; it is a respected part of communication. Pauses allow for thoughtful responses, and rushing to fill them can be perceived as impatient or even disrespectful.

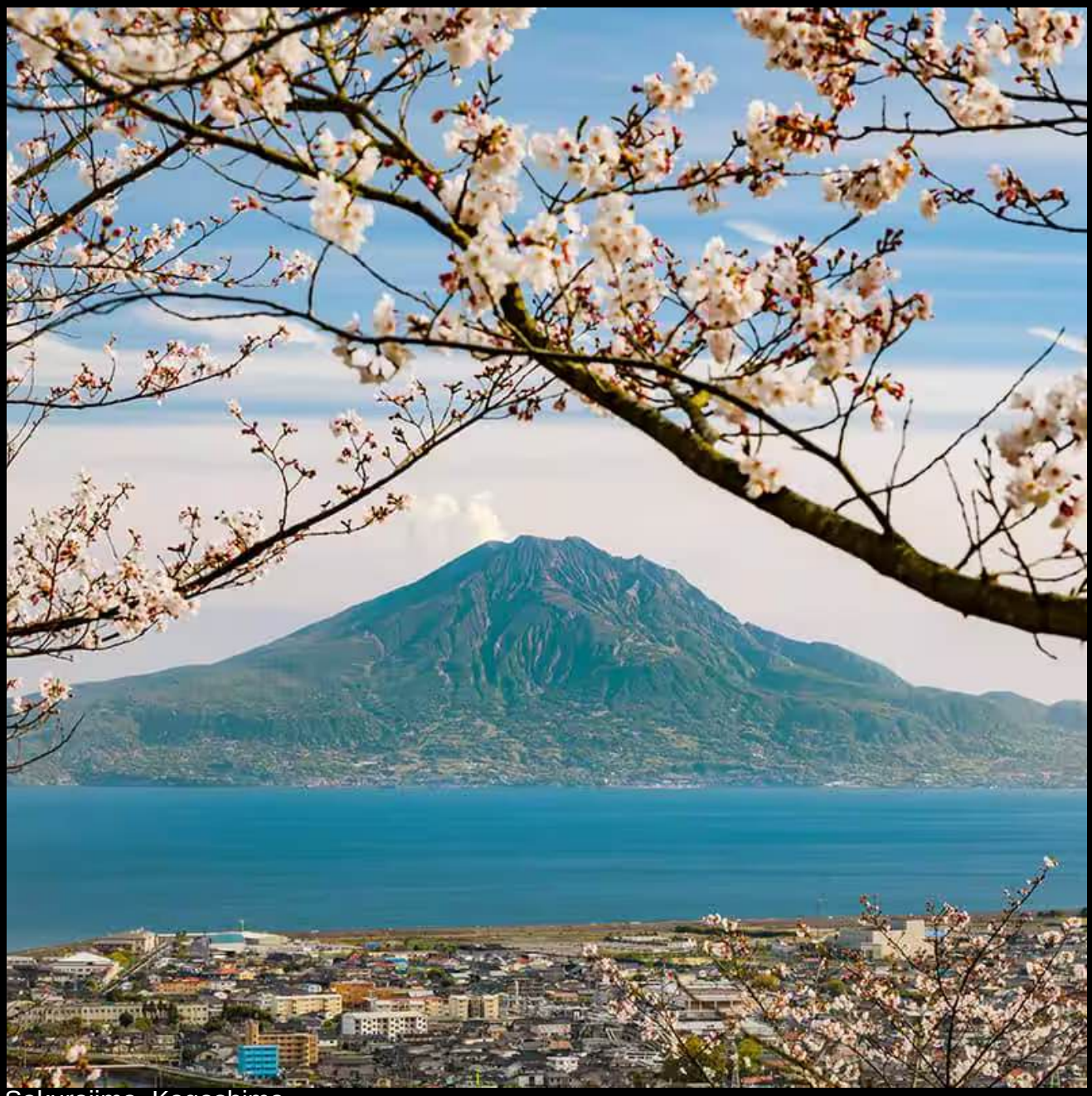
This applies particularly in meetings. If a suggestion is met with silence, it does not necessarily indicate disagreement or disinterest. It often means that the idea is being considered carefully. The best approach is to wait and observe rather than assuming a response is required immediately. Learning to be comfortable with silence is a subtle but important skill in Japanese business settings.

“NOMIKAI CONVERSATIONS ARE UNDERSTOOD TO BE SEPARATE FROM FORMAL WORKPLACE INTERACTIONS.”

Adjusting to Japanese business etiquette takes time, but the effort is well worth it. The most important thing is to demonstrate respect, patience, and a willingness to adapt. Even if mistakes are made, showing an understanding of the underlying principles will go a long way in earning trust and credibility. If in doubt, err on the side of formality and attentiveness; these qualities are always well received in Japan.

Beyond the rules themselves, what truly matters is the ability to observe and respond to the dynamics of each situation. Japanese business culture places great value on attentiveness to detail and the ability to read the room. Paying close attention to how colleagues interact, adapting to their pace, and recognising the subtleties of hierarchy and group consensus will provide a far greater advantage than simply memorising etiquette. Ultimately, success in Japan is not just about following protocol but about showing genuine respect for the culture and the people within it.

"WHAT TRULY MATTERS IS THE ABILITY TO OBSERVE AND RESPOND TO THE DYNAMICS OF EACH SITUATION."



Sakurajima, Kagoshima

BUSINESS JAPANESE FOR PEOPLE IN A RUSH

BY PAUL ASHTON

もう一度きちんと確認しましょうか
(Mou ichido kichinto kakunin shimashou ka)

Meaning:
The phrase 「もう一度きちんと確認しましょうか。」 translates to "Shall we check it properly once more?" It consists of:

- もう一度 (mou ichido) – "once more" or "one more time"
- きちんと (kichinto) – "properly," "thoroughly," or "accurately"
- 確認 (kakunin) – "confirmation" or "checking"
- しましょうか (shimashou ka) – polite suggestion form, meaning "Shall we...?"

This phrase is commonly used in professional or formal settings when ensuring that something is correct before finalizing or proceeding.

Usage in Context:
In Japanese business culture, attention to detail is highly valued, and confirming information before taking action is a common practice.

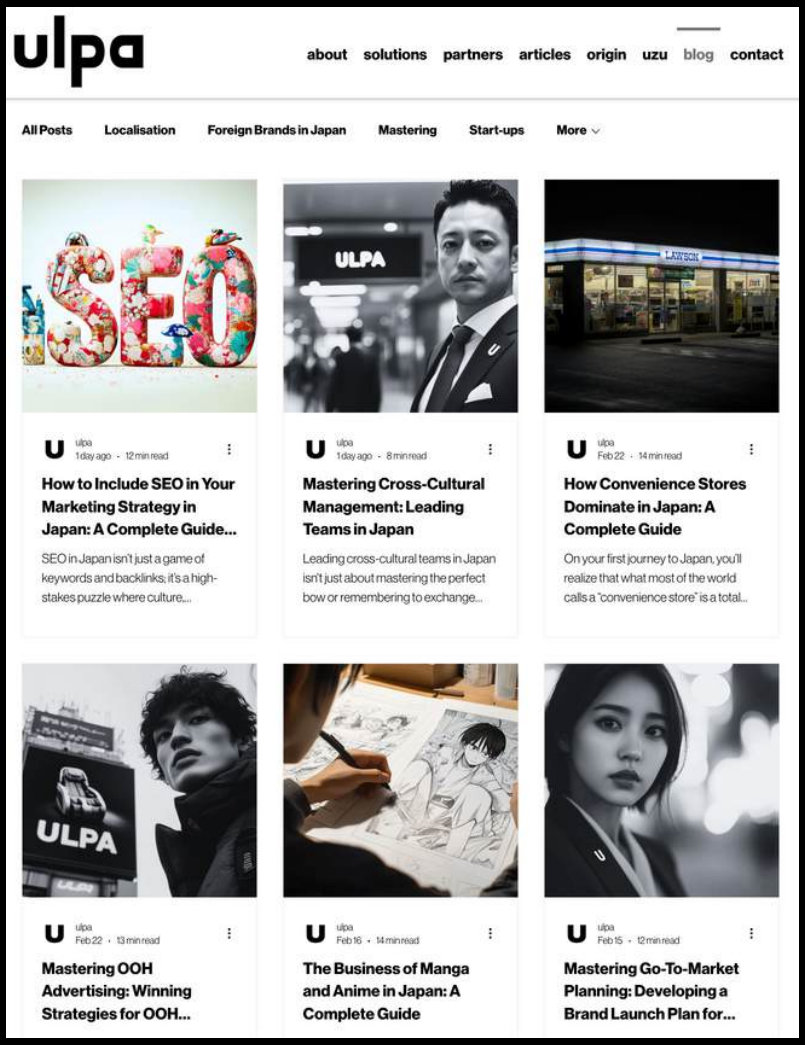
Using 「もう一度きちんと確認しましょうか。」 demonstrates diligence and professionalism. It can also serve as a polite way to request a re-check without sounding accusatory.

Example:
Context: You are working on a report with your team, and before submitting it to the manager, you suggest reviewing it thoroughly one more time.

- Phrase:
- もう一度きちんと確認しましょうか。
- Translation:
- "Shall we check it properly once more?"
-

Cultural Note:
In Japan, double-checking is a key aspect of workplace culture. Whether in customer service, corporate environments, or manufacturing, ensuring that all details are correct before proceeding is expected. Mistakes can be seen as a loss of credibility, so confirming details multiple times is not only common but often necessary.

For more inspiration, go to ulpa.jp/blog and read over 80 free posts on marketing, branding and building a business in Japan.



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