# UZU

Monthly Review

## Be The Center Of The Whirlpool


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ISSUE NUMBER 7

# THIS ISSUE

# FROM THE EDITOR

**Paul Ashton**
**Founder**
**ULPA**

Welcome to UZU Issue Number 7, and happy February! As we make our way out of the winter months, I can almost smell the cherry blossom! Here's hoping you have an amazing February.

In this edition, we dive into stories that challenge conventions and inspire curiosity. Our "Inside the Whirlpool" interview features Aaron Mollin, the founder of Ichijiku, whose bespoke kimono-inspired jackets fuse sustainability with luxury. His vision demonstrates the power of blending tradition with innovation.

"Riding the Kuroshio" turns the spotlight on Mitsubishi, tracing its evolution from a small shipping company to a cornerstone of Japan's economy.

Elsewhere, Gordon McLean dissects the democratization of branding, proving that you don't need massive budgets to build a meaningful connection with your audience. His perspectives resonate deeply in an era of authenticity and reliability.

For history enthusiasts, "Who the Hell is Yoshiko Shinohara?" explores the life of Japan's first self-made female billionaire. Her journey is a testament to breaking barriers and redefining what's possible in a society rooted in tradition.

This issue also includes five fresh takes on Japanese culture, branding, and marketing. Of particular note is Resilience on the Edge of Inevitability, a timely exploration of Japan's relationship with earthquakes and disaster preparedness. It's a thought-provoking reminder of how Japan continues to adapt to its seismic reality.

This month, Japanese Business Etiquette 101 unpacks "Networking," while Business Japanese for People in a Rush provides a quick phrase to sharpen your professional edge.

Finally, our book review highlights Lost Japan, a poignant exploration of the country's cultural heritage and its ongoing dialogue with modernity. A must-read for anyone seeking to understand the soul of this fascinating nation.

This edition spans 80 pages of insights, stories, and ideas to spark your curiosity and creativity. Thank you for being part of the UZU community. Let's embrace this month with purpose, and as always, keep that whirlpool spinning!

Image: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer

# PAY NO ATTENTION TO THE MAN BEHIND THE CURTAIN

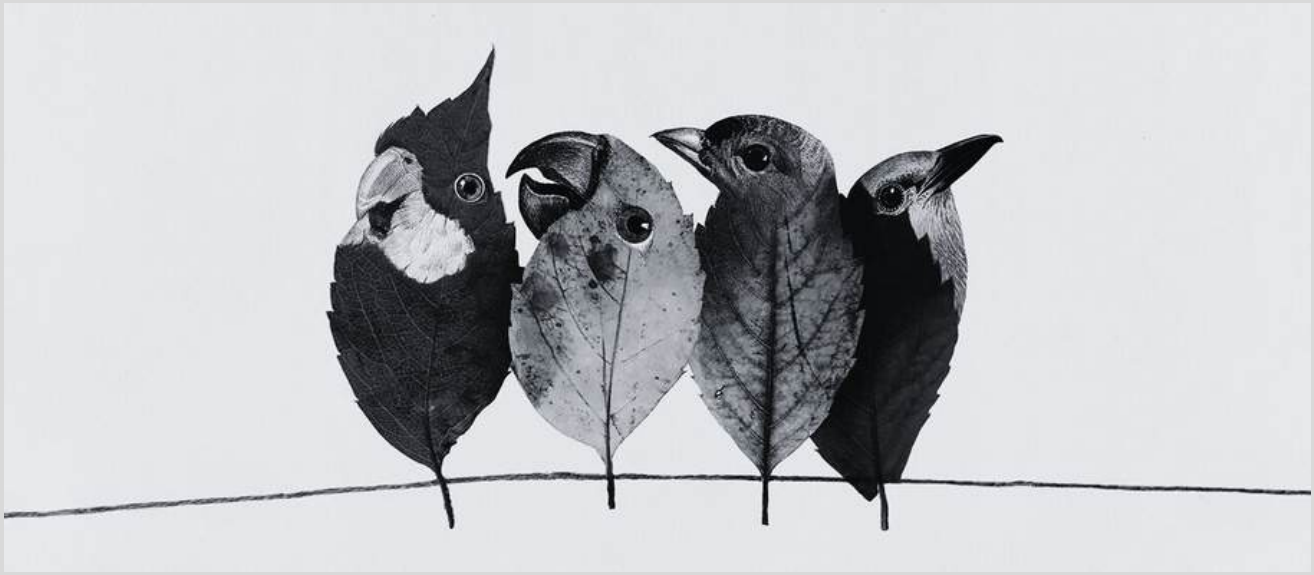
BY PAUL ASHTON

The world of A-B testing has long been sold to marketers as a paragon of data-driven decision-making, a reliable, scientific method to separate the wheat from the chaff, the winning ad from the flop. But the curtain's been yanked back, and the wizard behind it looks a lot more like a snake oil salesman. Enter Michael Braun and Eric M. Schwartz, two marketing researchers who have done the unthinkable: called out the glaring flaws in one of digital advertising's most trusted tools. Their study, the rather wordy, "Where A-B Testing Goes Wrong: How Divergent Delivery Affects What Online Experiments Cannot (and Can) Tell You About How Customers Respond to Advertising", published in the Journal of Marketing, lays bare the fundamental flaw in A-B testing on platforms like Google and Meta. And let's not sugarcoat it, it turns out it's a load of smoke and mirrors.

The problem, innocuously dubbed "divergent delivery," is anything but benign. These platforms, driven by opaque algorithms, don't just compare two ads in a neat little vacuum. No, they meddle. They optimise. They interfere. The sustainability ad you're testing doesn't go head-to-head with the aesthetics ad in a fair fight; it gets served to users with green thumbs and eco-friendly hashtags, while the aesthetics ad cosies up to design enthusiasts. What you're measuring isn't ad performance, it's audience bias. Byron Sharp, the marketing guru who doesn't mince words, put it bluntly: "Short story: A-B tests on social media can't be trusted. Unreliable. Misleading results." And if that doesn't send a chill down your budget-allocating spine, it should.

Braun and Schwartz didn't just spot this flaw; they meticulously dissected it. Field experiments, simulations, and statistical models revealed a nightmare scenario: not only do these biased tests skew results, but they can flip them entirely. Picture

"LET'S NOT SUGARCOAT IT, IT TURNS OUT IT'S A LOAD OF SMOKE AND MIRRORS."



this, a campaign you think is a slam dunk, a true creative masterpiece, turns out to be a dud when you change just one variable: the audience the algorithm favours. That's not optimisation; that's chaos dressed up in a lab coat.

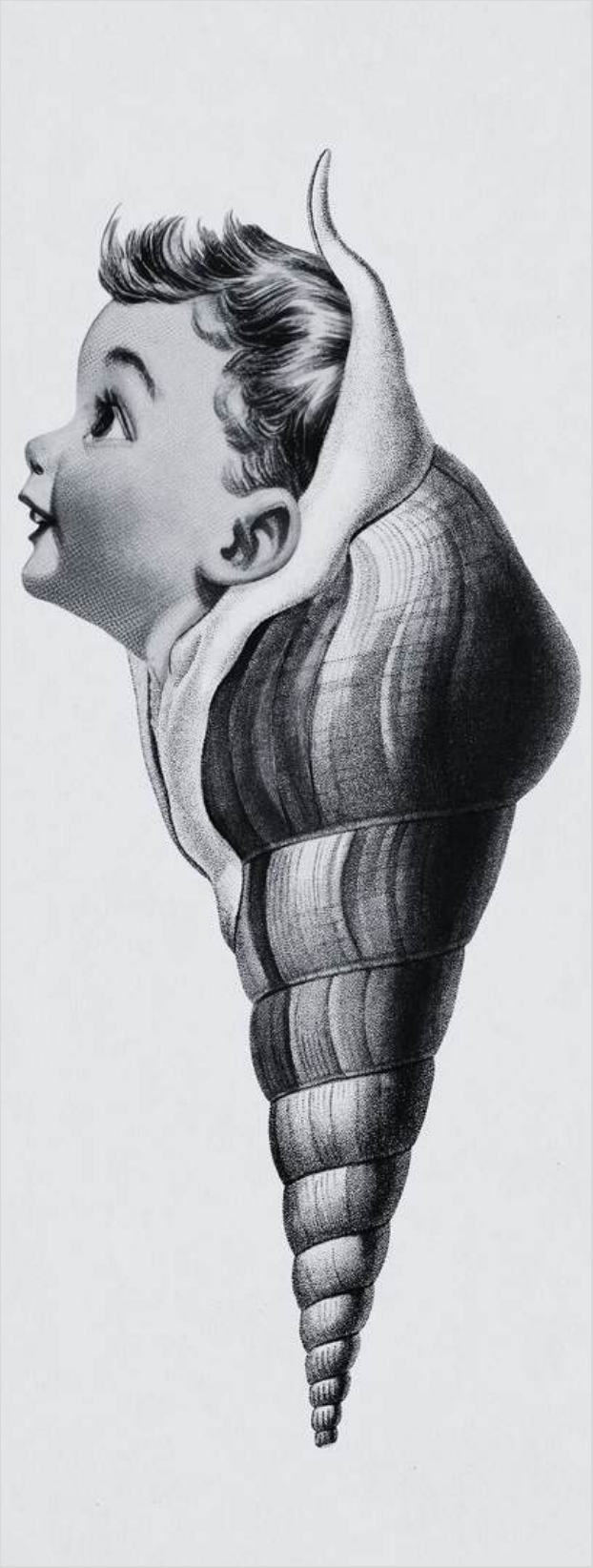
And here's the kicker, this is happening everywhere. Platforms pitch their tools as if they are randomised and scientific, but the reality is starkly different. Targeting algorithms adjust delivery based on ad content, serving ads to users with specific latent characteristics. These characteristics, preferences, past behaviour, predicted interests, are buried deep in the algorithm's black box, invisible to advertisers. Braun and Schwartz found that these biases don't just happen; they're baked into the system. The very mechanism that powers targeting also sabotages experimental integrity.

Consider one of their own field tests: a campaign for the City of Detroit. Testing 14 ads with varying appeals, their experiment exposed a striking gender imbalance. Ads featuring women in emotionally framed messages were disproportionately served to female users, while those with rational appeals targeting traditionally male roles were skewed toward male audiences. Even control ads, neutral content unrelated to the campaign, weren't safe from the algorithm's meddling. The results revealed a damning truth: even in the supposed sanctity of an experiment, algorithms reinforce stereotypes and biases rather than levelling the playing field.

This is bad science, plain and simple. When ad targeting amplifies latent biases, the results become meaningless. The A-B test no longer tells you which creative resonates most broadly or drives conversions; it tells you which ad was fed to a pre-curated echo chamber. If you're making million-dollar decisions based on this data, you might as well throw darts at a board blindfolded.

"EVEN CONTROL ADS, NEUTRAL CONTENT UNRELATED TO THE CAMPAIGN, WEREN'T SAFE FROM THE ALGORITHM'S MEDDLING."

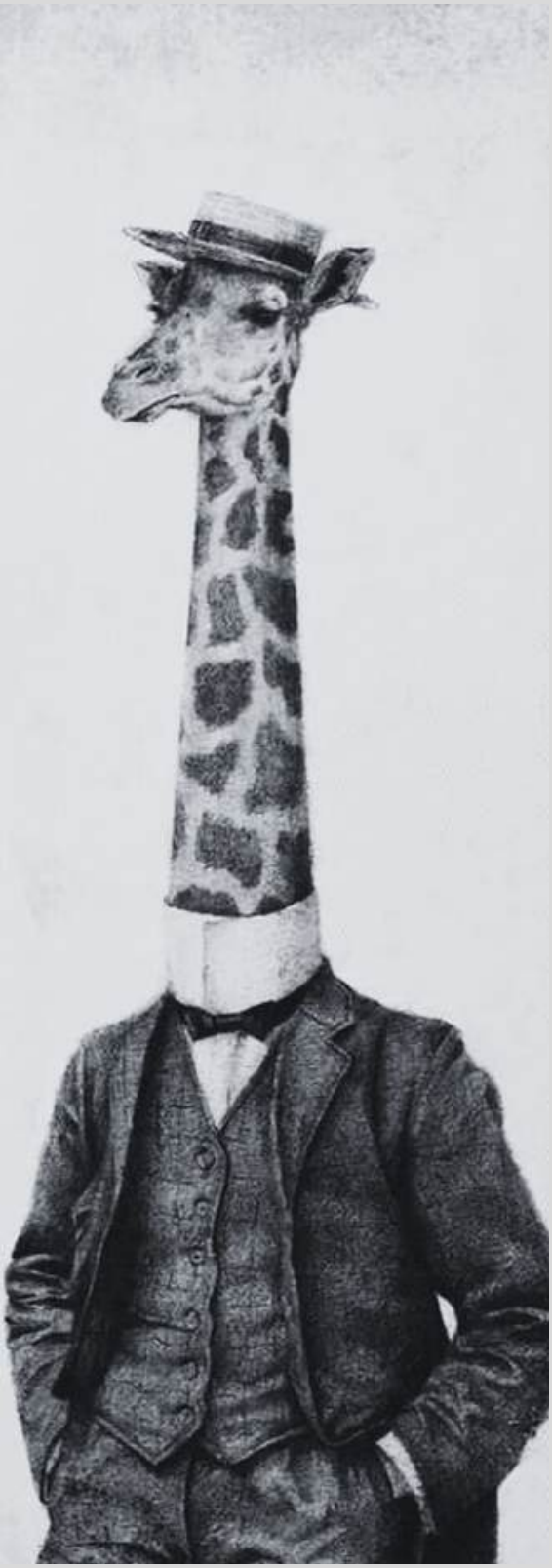
What makes this worse is the stakes. A-B tests aren't just used to tweak ads; they guide overarching strategies. They dictate brand messaging, channel investments, and even the stories brands tell about themselves. But when the data you're leaning on is tainted, every decision that follows is built on a shaky foundation. It's the marketing equivalent of trying to build a skyscraper on sand, and wondering why it leans.



The situation becomes even more jarring when you frame it against a culture like Japan's, where precision, transparency, and integrity are sacrosanct. Think about Toyota's Andon cord system, where any worker on the production line can halt everything if they spot a quality issue. That ethos prioritises truth over speed, long-term trust over short-term efficiency. Now, compare that to the black-box algorithms of Meta and Google, where the ad-delivery process is designed not to ensure fairness or accuracy but to wring out maximum engagement. Their priority isn't your confidence in the data, it's your budget, emptied faster than you can say "cost-per-click."

Not every platform operates in this fog of obfuscation, though. Rakuten, the Japanese e-commerce giant, provides a refreshing contrast. It offers advertisers meaningful transparency about how their campaigns are targeted, allowing marketers to understand and even adjust for biases. This kind of openness isn't just a good PR move; it's an actual solution to Braun and Schwartz's

"THEIR PRIORITY ISN'T YOUR CONFIDENCE IN THE DATA, IT'S YOUR BUDGET, EMPTIED FASTER THAN YOU CAN SAY 'COST-PER-CLICK.'"



uncovered problem. Without transparency, marketers are left navigating with a blindfold, clutching at metrics that can't be trusted.

Even solutions like holdout tests and proportional targeting, while promising, feel like compromises rather than cures. Holdout tests give you some clarity on the incremental lift by comparing users exposed to an ad with those who weren't. But they rely on the same algorithmic scaffolding that causes the problem in the first place. Proportional targeting, where ads are delivered to balanced subsets of users, tries to mimic true randomisation but gets shoved aside because it's less profitable for platforms. They'd rather sell you engagement than truth.

What Braun and Schwartz's findings ultimately expose isn't just a flaw in A-B testing but in the entire belief system underpinning digital advertising. We've been sold the idea that data is a kind of truth serum, an infallible guide to more intelligent decisions. But data, as they've shown, is only as reliable as the systems that generate it. These systems, built to prioritise optimisation over accuracy, are designed to manipulate rather than illuminate. Every misinterpreted test result becomes a domino, toppling into wasted budgets, misguided campaigns, and eroded trust, trust that consumers are increasingly unwilling to extend.

Marketers, particularly those in cultures like Japan where trust is paramount, can't afford to ignore this wake-up call. The stakes aren't just financial; they're existential. When the tools you rely on are flawed, the damage goes far beyond a few underperforming ads. It infects every strategy, every decision, every dollar spent in blind faith.

"THIS ISN'T JUST A FLAW IN A-B TESTING BUT IN THE ENTIRE BELIEF SYSTEM UNDERPINNING DIGITAL ADVERTISING."

The path forward demands bravery. It requires marketers to stop blindly trusting the platforms and start demanding transparency. It calls for experiments designed with integrity, data validated by third parties, and a willingness to face uncomfortable truths. Platforms, too, must evolve if they want to maintain their relevance in a world that's starting to see through their smokescreens. The lesson here is as simple as it is urgent: precision and integrity aren't just ideals, they're necessities.

And so, we're left with a choice: continue following the Yellow Brick Road, chasing the promise of data-driven enlightenment and answers that might never come, or step off the path and confront the reality behind the curtain. Braun and Schwartz have shown us the stakes. The Wizard of A-B testing isn't what he seems, and in its place, we are left with a construct of illusions, half-truths and misdirection. Now it's up to us to decide: will we keep walking blindly, hoping for miracles, or finally face the truth and demand better? Because if we don't? We'll remain forever lost in a land of myths, where reliable insights are as elusive as Emerald City itself.

"PRECISION AND INTEGRITY AREN'T JUST IDEALS, THEY'RE NECESSITIES."

Image: Toshiji FUKUDA

# THE DUCK DILEMMA

BY PAUL ASHTON

Japan is a country of contrasts. On the surface, it glides with precision and grace, a seamless symphony of bullet trains, immaculate cities, and a cultural identity steeped in order and tradition, but scratch a little deeper beneath the surface, and plenty of chaos is revealed. This dichotomy between the perception and reality of life in Japan led me to coin the term "The Duck Dilemma" a few years ago, to describe this situation neatly. This term can be applied to many takes on Japan at the micro and macro levels. Hear me out.

For the most part, Japan behaves like a duck cruising down a river. Above water, everything looks calm, measured, and effortless. Below the surface, however, the duck's legs churn at ten to the dozen, just barely moving it forward. More recently, for Japan, that paddling has taken the form of an economy straining under inflation, uneven wage growth, and widening disparities. The rising Engel's coefficient, now the highest in the G7, is one of the simplest ways to frame this dilemma, as it reveals the true cost of keeping up appearances.

The poorer is a family, the greater is the proportion of the total outgo which must be used for food... The proportion of the outgo used for food, other things being equal, is the best measure of the material standard of living of a population.

The Engel's coefficient measures the percentage of household income spent on food, a deceptively simple metric that reveals much about economic well-being. In a healthy economy, households spend a smaller proportion of their income on necessities, leaving room for savings or discretionary spending. But Japan's coefficient surged to 28.7% in the third quarter of 2024, far above those of other G7 nations. While countries like the U.S. remain below 20%, Japan's sharp rise reflects an economy burdened by inflation, stagnant wages, and a rapidly ageing population.

"FOR THE MOST PART, JAPAN BEHAVES LIKE A DUCK CRUISING DOWN A RIVER."

Japan's reliance on imported food, over 60% of its supply, has made it vulnerable to global price fluctuations and the yen's weakening. Staples like rice, poultry, and fish have become significantly more expensive, with Pacific saury (Sanma) prices alone rising 90% over five years. Dual-income families, stretched thin by work hours and low wage growth, increasingly rely on prepared meals, which now account for 15.8% of food spending, up three points from a decade ago. Seniors, who spend a larger share of their income on food, also drive up the coefficient as they make up roughly 30% of the population.

While Engel's coefficient isn't a perfect measure of wealth, its rise in Japan signals a growing strain on household budgets. Incomes are stagnating even as food prices soar. Compared to countries like the U.S., where higher healthcare and housing costs skew food spending downward, Japan's figures point directly to the financial pressures on families.

However, the food cost crisis is just one layer of Japan's economic challenges. Wage growth, while promising on paper, is unevenly distributed, widening the divide between urban and rural regions.

2024's wage increases were the highest in 33 years, driven by tier 1 corporations responding to inflation and labour shortages. These wage hikes are boosting consumption among younger generations in urban areas, but tier 2 and tier 3 small and medium-sized enterprises,

"WHILE ENGEL'S COEFFICIENT ISN'T A PERFECT MEASURE OF WEALTH, ITS RISE IN JAPAN SIGNALS A GROWING STRAIN ON HOUSEHOLD BUDGETS."

especially those in rural regions, are struggling to follow suit. SMEs form the backbone of Japan's economy, yet many operate on razor-thin margins and lack the bargaining power to adjust prices. Unable to raise wages, they're leaving rural workers behind, further deepening the economic disparity between urban and rural Japan.

For decades, Japan prioritised shareholder returns and corporate efficiency over wage growth. Reforms aimed at maximising return on equity encouraged companies to focus on profits and dividends instead of investing in their workforce. While this approach allowed large corporations to flourish, the benefits rarely trickled down to smaller businesses or rural areas. Now, with labour shortages forcing wage increases, these structural imbalances are becoming harder to ignore.

Rural SMEs face additional pressures. Many are on the brink of bankruptcy due to labour shortages and a lack of resources to invest in productivity-enhancing technologies that could justify higher wages. Government calls for wage increases are well-meaning but fail to address the structural challenges that prevent smaller firms from acting. Without targeted support, such as subsidies for rural businesses or policies that enable SMEs to pass on costs, the gap between urban prosperity and rural struggle will only grow wider.

"SMES FORM THE BACKBONE OF JAPAN'S ECONOMY, YET MANY OPERATE ON RAZOR-THIN MARGINS."

This uneven pace of wage growth creates a dangerous feedback loop. Urban workers with rising wages are boosting consumption, but rural households are tightening their belts, spending less, and fueling the Engel's coefficient. With fewer rural consumers able to spend, SMEs in these regions face declining demand, making it even harder for them to raise wages.

Japan's policymakers are acutely aware of these risks. The Bank of Japan has pointed to wage growth as a key driver of consumption, but it also acknowledges that SMEs struggling with profitability are falling behind. The result is a fragmented recovery, where some regions and industries thrive while others stagnate or decline. GDP may show signs of growth, but the benefits are not evenly distributed. The rising Engel's coefficient mirrors this imbalance. It's not just a reflection of inflation; it's a warning sign that Japan's economic gains are not being shared. Urban centres and large corporations continue to grow, but rural regions and smaller firms are paddling harder just to stay afloat.

The broader consequences are profound. Consumer spending, which accounts for more than half of Japan's GDP, is unevenly distributed, undermining the recovery that wage increases in urban areas are supposed to support. Real wages, what people can buy with their earnings, are still lagging behind inflation, leaving many Japanese workers feeling poorer despite headline-grabbing pay raises.

"THE RESULT IS A FRAGMENTED RECOVERY, WHERE SOME REGIONS AND INDUSTRIES THRIVE WHILE OTHERS STAGNATE OR DECLINE."

The cultural toll is just as significant. Rising costs are eroding more than just household budgets for a nation where food is deeply tied to identity. Families unable to afford traditional meals are experiencing a quiet loss of dignity, a shift that speaks volumes about the true cost of economic strain. Japan's struggles are often framed as part of a global narrative, supply chain disruptions, inflation, and geopolitical tensions. But the more profound truth is more specific. Japan's real challenge lies in bridging the gap between its corporate giants and the SMEs that support its rural economy. The Engel's coefficient is more than a statistic; it reflects a country grappling with systemic inequalities.

For now, Japan continues to glide forward, but the paddling beneath the surface is growing more desperate. The duck dilemma will only worsen if policymakers and businesses fail to address the structural barriers holding back SMEs and rural communities. Calm above, chaotic below; the facade won't hold much longer.

"JAPAN'S REAL CHALLENGE LIES IN BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN ITS CORPORATE GIANTS AND THE SMES."

Image: FEARNOTRUTH

# IS BRAND BUILDING THE SOLE PRESERVE OF MAJOR PLAYERS WITH MAJOR BUDGETS?

BY GORDON MCLEAN

Conventional wisdom would have us believe that effective brand building is a privilege reserved for the heavyweights of the business world. This perspective posits that only those with deep pockets and substantial resources can craft and sustain a powerful brand presence that resonates with consumers. However, this viewpoint overlooks the essence of what truly makes a brand memorable and impactful. In the current digital age, where access to vast audiences is unprecedented and cost-effective, the premise that brand building is solely the domain of major players with major budgets is increasingly becoming a myth.

Brand building, at its core, is about establishing a unique identity and forging a meaningful connection with your audience. It's about articulating what your brand stands for, the values it embodies, and the promises it makes to its customers. This endeavor, while undoubtedly benefiting from financial investment, is not solely dependent on it. The proliferation of digital platforms and social media has democratized brand building, providing avenues for brands of all sizes to engage with their target audiences directly, creatively, and, most importantly, affordably.

Start ups, small and medium-sized businesses have a distinct advantage in this new landscape. Their agility and capacity for personal connection allow them to craft authentic, relatable brands that can often resonate more deeply with


"BRAND BUILDING, AT ITS CORE, IS ABOUT ESTABLISHING A UNIQUE IDENTITY AND FORGING A MEANINGFUL CONNECTION WITH YOUR AUDIENCE."


consumers than the polished, sometimes distant images of larger corporations. These smaller entities can leverage storytelling, a powerful tool in the brand-building arsenal, to share their journey, mission, and the people behind the brand. Through platforms like Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn, SMEs can create compelling content that speaks directly to their audience's values, interests, and needs, fostering a sense of community and loyalty that money can't buy.

Also, the rise of digital marketing tools and analytics has leveled the playing field significantly. SEO, content marketing, and email campaigns offer cost-effective methods to increase brand visibility, engage with consumers, and build brand equity over time. These tools allow brands to reach their target demographics with precision and efficiency, tailoring messages and offerings to specific segments of the market. The data gleaned from these interactions provides invaluable insights into consumer behavior and preferences, enabling brands to adapt and evolve in ways that deepen consumer relationships and drive loyalty.

Another aspect where budget constraints can inadvertently benefit brand building is innovation. Limited resources often breed creativity, pushing brands to think outside the traditional marketing box and explore unconventional ways to capture attention and engender loyalty. This can include guerrilla marketing tactics, partnerships with other brands or influencers, and leveraging user-generated content to increase engagement and reach. These innovative strategies can generate buzz and elevate brand visibility in ways that

"SMALLER ENTITIES CAN LEVERAGE STORYTELLING, A POWERFUL TOOL IN THE BRAND-BUILDING ARSENAL."

large-scale advertising campaigns cannot, by creating authentic experiences that consumers are eager to share.

What's more, the need for community building and engagement has never been more important. Consumers today crave brands that not only offer quality products or services but also share their values and contribute positively to society. Smaller businesses can capitalize on this by actively participating in their communities, whether through local initiatives,, social causes, or sustainability efforts. By doing so, they not only build brand awareness but also establish a brand character that is altruistic and responsible, attributes that can significantly influence consumer perception and loyalty.

The narrative that brand building is an exclusive endeavor for big players with big budgets fails to capture the dynamic and multifaceted nature of brand development in today's digital and socially connected world. Success in brand building is not measured by the size of your budget but by the depth of your understanding of your audience, the authenticity of your message, and the creativity of your engagement strategies.

Our digital age has equipped businesses of all sizes with the tools and platforms to tell their stories, connect with their audiences, and build meaningful brands. It has shown that with strategic thinking, creativity, and a commitment to genuine engagement, brand building is not only possible for SMEs but can be a game-changer in their growth and success. The key lies in leveraging the resources available, understanding the power of direct consumer

"SUCCESS IN BRAND BUILDING IS NOT MEASURED BY THE SIZE OF YOUR BUDGET BUT BY THE DEPTH OF YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF YOUR AUDIENCE."

engagement, and maintaining a consistent, authentic brand presence across all channels.

In short, the democratization of brand building in the digital age offers a compelling counter-narrative to the idea that only major players with major budgets can build successful brands. Today, the opportunity to craft a powerful, resonant brand is accessible to all, contingent not on the size of the budget but on the strength of the strategy, the authenticity of the engagement, and the depth of the connection forged with the audience. This shift not only levels the playing field but also enriches the marketplace with diverse, authentic brands that reflect a broader spectrum of values, stories, and experiences.

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

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

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

**Gordon McLean**
**Founder**
**Fear No Truth**
**www.fearnotruth.com**

"TODAY, THE OPPORTUNITY TO CRAFT A POWERFUL, RESONANT BRAND IS ACCESSIBLE TO ALL."

Image: UZU

# INSIDE THE WHIRLPOOL with AARON MOLLIN

You might not guess it now, but in my younger days, I had a sharp eye for fashion. Regularly wearing a crisp button-down shirt, casual jacket, slack jeans, and my blue suede Dr. Martens, I thought I cut quite the figure. These days, while I still appreciate good tailoring, finding something unique (that fits) in Japan is always a challenge. My hope was ignited recently, when I came across a LinkedIn post about a pop-up store at Haneda Airport. An expat was transforming vintage silk kimonos into stunning bespoke jackets. Intrigued, I reached out to Aaron Mollin, the founder of Ichijiku.

Aaron's path is as layered as his creations. After leaving a legal career, he immersed himself in Japan's cultural arts, from woodblock prints to matcha. But it was a chance gift, a collection of vintage silk kimonos, that sparked the idea for Ichijiku. Today, his Tokyo-based sustainable luxury brand transforms rare kimono fabrics into one-of-a-kind jackets, blending traditional craftsmanship with modern design.

Ichijiku now operates a reservation-only gallery in Yoyogi-Uehara, where guests enjoy exclusive access to Ichijiku's fabric collection, Japanese delicacies, and sparkling sake. His bespoke pieces, ranging from JPY 250,000 to 1.5 million, are designed to be treasured for generations. With plans to expand to London in 2025, Aaron is bringing Japan's textile heritage to the global stage.

For this interview, I'm breaking from UZU's usual style and showcasing Aaron's vibrant designs in full colour, because a story this rich deserves nothing less. It's my pleasure to introduce Aaron Mollin, the visionary behind Ichijiku.

"IT WAS A CHANCE GIFT, A COLLECTION OF VINTAGE SILK KIMONOS, THAT SPARKED THE IDEA FOR ICHIJIKU."

What inspired you to start your business in Japan?
I had been living in Japan and working in various capacities for nearly 15 years, and had developed a deep interest in various forms of Japanese craftsmanship. The business actually started in my hometown of Toronto, Canada; however, I quickly returned to Japan when I realized the business had potential. All Ichijiku's fabrics are sourced in Japan, and all of our production is in Japan. It doesn't make sense to be anywhere else.

How does Japan's business culture shape your approach?
The rigid nature of Japanese business culture is always frustrating to work around. However, this dynamic also provides fertile ground for innovation by people who aren't constrained by that rigidity. For example, for hundreds of years, the rigidity of Japanese business was restricting kimono makers and fashion designers in their ability to perceive women's kimono fabric as being applicable to men's fashion. By not having any preconceived notions or norms to adhere to, Ichijiku was able to overcome that hurdle from the outset.

What was a key moment that helped you succeed in Japan?
Overcoming the tremendous hurdle of securing a physical shop location despite the business only existing for a year. It took about 3 months to find a property that did a good job of reflecting the vision of the brand–something with a modern Japanese feel. And when we finally put in the application, we found out we were "nibante", meaning second in line (someone had beaten us to the application process). By some miracle, however, the person who submitted the first application decided to drop out, so Ichijiku was able to secure the property. Months later we were able to connect with the person who turned down the property, and when we asked her why, she said "I knew that this property was meant for someone else". Wild...

"ALL ICHIJIKU'S FABRICS ARE SOURCED IN JAPAN, AND ALL OF OUR PRODUCTION IS IN JAPAN."

How do you build strong relationships with clients and partners here?
Partners: Visit them in person and spend the requisite time to build relationships. I also make sure to be as accommodating as possible to their operating style and requirements, and never negotiate (because the prices they charge are usually very fair to begin with).

Clients: I handle all client communication directly, and make myself available at just about all hours of the day to ensure I'm able to attend to their needs. When a client visits the gallery (usually with a group) I ensure they're well taken care of by providing them with a variety of Japanese treats, fine teas, champagne, and sparkling sake. More than anything else, though, I make sure to accommodate the unique schedules and backgrounds of each client. Sometimes, this means offering them a more condensed experience or hand-delivering commissioned pieces to them anywhere in Japan. It's all about making sure the client feels appreciated.

How do you handle Japan's regulatory requirements?
Fortunately regulatory requirements around apparel are quite straightforward, and are set out in Japan's Household Goods Quality Labeling Act.

The bigger challenge relates to areas that aren't regulated, such as how to handle returns (we don't accept them since every piece is one of a kind and made of vintage fabric), product care (typically dry cleaning is your best bet), and maintenance (keep products away from extreme humidity). We usually recommend clients contact us if they have any questions. In certain situations, we can offer support with after-purchase tailoring and maintenance.

"WHEN A CLIENT VISITS THE GALLERY, I ENSURE THEY'RE WELL TAKEN CARE OF BY PROVIDING THEM WITH A VARIETY OF JAPANESE TREATS, FINE TEAS, CHAMPAGNE, AND SPARKLING SAKE."


What role does innovation play in your strategy?
Innovation is everything. I look at everything from the perspective of “Is this the right way to do something?” and “Is there a way to do this better?” If you really look at Ichijiku’s products and the way it operates, it’s basically the polar opposite of Big Fashion.

Can you share a marketing tactic that worked well in Japan?
Collaborating with the bar managers of the Bvlgari Hotel and Four Seasons Otemachi Hotel, and creating kimono blazers for them to wear at work. I get enquiries on an ongoing basis from potential clients who see the jackets at these luxury establishments and ask where they can purchase one. The bartenders also look absolutely dashing (though I may be slightly biased...).

“IT’S BASICALLY THE POLAR OPPOSITE OF BIG FASHION.”

What skills are crucial for success in Japan?
Being able to think outside the box; and never taking “impossible” for an answer. I can’t think of how many times I asked someone a question, only to be met with “it’s not possible.” I heard this a few dozen times when I was trying to create the first Kimono Bespoke piece, a 2-piece suit, out of an old kimono. It wasn’t until someone pulled me aside and said I should try to make the same request with a bolt of kimono fabric instead, that I was finally able to convince a tailor to give it a shot. That moment was monumental for me, because it really made me realize that a single problem can actually have dozens of different permutations of solutions. I don’t consider myself a master problem solver, but ever since then I’ve managed to come up with an alternative approach almost every single time someone tells me something “can’t be done”. Sometimes the alternative is even better than the initial solution.

How do you balance respecting tradition with introducing new ideas?
I’ve spent 20 years in Japan and have devoted a significant portion of that time to learning the language and culture. This served as an excellent base for when I began my research into kimono and kimono making because it allowed me to engage in sincere conversations with, and earn the trust of various individuals and companies in the kimono industry.

My goal with Ichijiku has never been driven by profit. It is purely about sharing the beauty of kimono fabric with the world in a respectful way. I have endeavored at every juncture to ensure that my actions are aligned with this goal, from keeping the designs of the garments relatively simple in order to emphasize the beauty of the fabrics, to keeping production in Japan. I’m very fortunate to say that seven years into this journey I have received nothing but praise from those in the kimono industry.

“I CAN’T THINK OF HOW MANY TIMES I ASKED SOMEONE A QUESTION, ONLY TO BE MET WITH “IT’S NOT POSSIBLE.”

What one piece of advice would you give to newcomers entering Japan?
Don't let yourself get distracted by asking too many questions of Japan's often inefficient and antiquated systems and rules. Learn to navigate them with the least amount of friction possible; and act swiftly whenever you uncover an unobstructed route.

And make sure you treat yourself to an onsen escape every once in a while.

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Many thanks to Aaron for taking his time to go through our ten questions in the Inside the Whirpool interview. I was really inspired by the journey Aaron has been on to get where he is with Ichijiku, and I am sure I am not the only one who will be want to make an appointment to visit the Ichijiku gallery, and pick something up on the way through.

Ichijiku has a limited stock for sale online, and their place of business is appointment only. So check out their site, and get in touch with Aaron for more details. Thanks!

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

**Aaron Mollin**
**Founder**
**Ichijiku**
**https://ichijiku.world/**

"MAKE SURE YOU TREAT YOURSELF TO AN ONSEN ESCAPE EVERY ONCE IN A WHILE."

Image: UZU

# RIDING THE KUROSHIO with MITSUBISHI

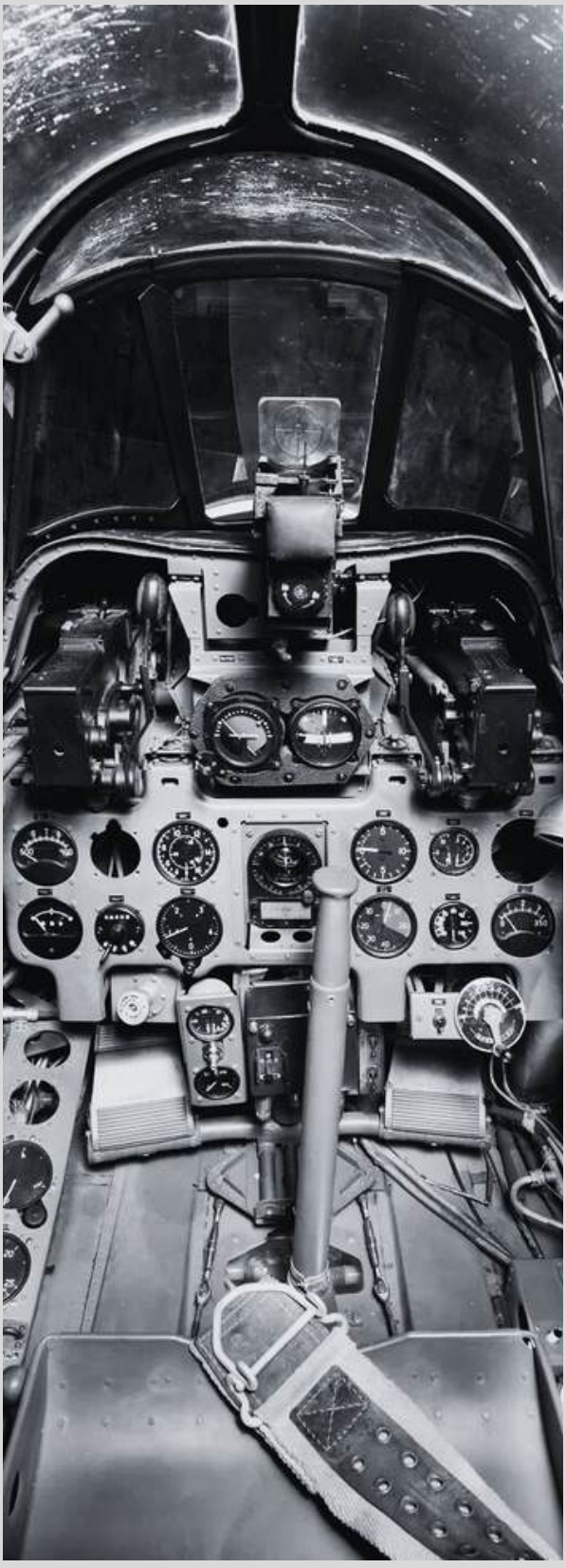
BY PAUL ASHTON

Few symbols are as evocative as Mitsubishi's three-diamond logo, a badge that speaks to resilience, ambition, and interconnectedness. But the story behind this logo is far more complex and nuanced than its clean geometric design suggests. Mitsubishi is not just a company, it is an institution that has evolved in lockstep with Japan's own transformation from a feudal society into a global economic powerhouse. From its humble beginnings as a small shipping company to its current position as the heart of a vast keiretsu network, Mitsubishi's journey encapsulates a story of industrial ingenuity, national ambition, and constant reinvention.

The origins of Mitsubishi lie in the early days of Japan's industrialisation. In 1870, Yataro Iwasaki, a samurai-turned-businessman, founded Tsukumo Shokai, a modest shipping enterprise with just three steamships. The timing was perfect: Japan was emerging from centuries of isolation under the Meiji Restoration, which had dismantled the feudal system and kick-started a national drive for modernisation. Maritime trade was key to Japan's integration with the world, and Iwasaki saw shipping as both an economic opportunity and a tool for Japan's industrial self-sufficiency. By 1873, the company was renamed Mitsubishi, combining "mitsu" (three) and "hishi/bishi" (water chestnut, a term often used to denote a diamond shape), and its iconic logo was adopted, derived from the Iwasaki family crest and the emblem of their former feudal lords, the Yamauchi clan.

"MITSUBISHI'S JOURNEY ENCAPSULATES A STORY OF INDUSTRIAL INGENUITY, NATIONAL AMBITION, AND CONSTANT REINVENTION."

In its early years, Mitsubishi focused on shipping, becoming a dominant player in Japan's maritime trade. However, Yataro Iwasaki's ambitions went far beyond the sea. His vision for Mitsubishi was expansive, and the company quickly diversified into mining, shipbuilding, finance, and other industries. This strategy was not merely about expansion for its own sake but about creating a vertically integrated enterprise where Mitsubishi could control every aspect of its operations. For instance, the company mined the coal that fuelled its ships and built those ships in its own shipyards, effectively making it self-reliant. By the early 20th century, Mitsubishi was one of Japan's four great zaibatsu (industrial conglomerates), alongside Mitsui, Sumitomo, and Yasuda.



The zaibatsu were the engines of Japan's rapid industrialisation but were also deeply intertwined with the nation's imperial ambitions. Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, one of the core arms of the group, became a major producer of military equipment, from ships to fighter planes like the A6M Zero, which gained fame during the Second World War. Mitsubishi's factories also produced tanks, torpedoes, and other wartime essentials, often relying on forced labour, including Allied prisoners of war, a troubling chapter in the company's history.

Japan's defeat in 1945 brought sweeping changes. Under Allied occupation, the zaibatsu were targeted for dismantling, as they were seen as facilitators of Japan's militarism and economic concentration. Mitsubishi was broken into smaller

"BY THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY, MITSUBISHI WAS ONE OF JAPAN'S FOUR GREAT ZAIBATSU."

companies, and even its name and logo were briefly banned. However, these divisions proved to be more symbolic than structural. By the 1950s, many of the former Mitsubishi entities had begun to regroup, forming what is now known as the Mitsubishi Group, a keiretsu or network of interrelated companies.

The keiretsu is often described as a modern version of the zaibatsu, but the two systems differ in important ways. Unlike the rigid, family-controlled hierarchies of the zaibatsu, a keiretsu is a more decentralised and horizontal network of independent companies. These firms remain legally autonomous but are tied together by cross-shareholdings, shared leadership, and cultural alignment. Imagine it as an extended family: when dealing with one member, you are often indirectly interacting with the entire network.

In practice, this can make navigating Japan's corporate landscape challenging for foreign companies. For example, a foreign company might have a strong relationship with a Japanese insurance firm that is part of a particular keiretsu. If this American company then seeks to work with a bank outside of that keiretsu, they might find themselves subtly steered toward the bank within the same network as their insurance partner. These alliances, though informal, are powerful, and they create an ecosystem of loyalty that can be difficult for outsiders to penetrate.

"THESE ALLIANCES, THOUGH INFORMAL, ARE POWERFUL, AND THEY CREATE AN ECOSYSTEM OF LOYALTY THAT CAN BE DIFFICULT FOR OUTSIDERS TO PENETRATE."

The Mitsubishi Group is one of the most prominent examples of the keiretsu system in action. Its core companies include Mitsubishi Corporation, Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, Mitsubishi Electric, and MUFG (Mitsubishi UFJ Financial Group), but the network extends far beyond these pillars. Other influential members of the Mitsubishi Group include Mitsubishi Chemical Group, Mitsubishi Motors Corporation, Mitsubishi Estate Co., Mitsubishi Materials Corporation, Mitsubishi Gas Chemical Company, Mitsubishi Steel Manufacturing, Mitsubishi Fuso Truck and Bus Corporation, AGC Inc. (formerly Asahi Glass Company), Kirin Holdings Company, and Nikon Corporation. These companies, though legally independent, collaborate on projects, share resources, and align their strategies to reinforce the strength of the group as a whole.

For Mitsubishi, this interconnected structure has been a source of stability and resilience. During the financial crises of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, the Mitsubishi Group demonstrated its collective strength by rallying resources to support struggling members, such as Mitsubishi Motors. The keiretsu model also fosters long-term thinking and strategic collaboration, allowing Mitsubishi companies to innovate and expand in a coordinated manner.

The dismantling of the zaibatsu may have reshaped Mitsubishi, but it did not diminish its influence. During Japan's post-war economic growth, Mitsubishi adapted to the changing times, shifting its focus from heavy industry to new growth sectors. Mitsubishi Heavy Industries became a leader in shipbuilding, aerospace, and energy systems, while Mitsubishi Motors carved out a global reputation for its vehicles, from the

"THE KEIRETSU MODEL ALSO FOSTERS LONG-TERM THINKING AND STRATEGIC COLLABORATION"

fuel-efficient Colt to the rally-winning Lancer Evolution. Mitsubishi Corporation, the group's trading arm, expanded into global commerce, handling everything from natural resources to consumer goods.

Real estate became another pillar of Mitsubishi's success. Mitsubishi Estate Co. developed much of Tokyo's Marunouchi district, turning it into a hub of commerce and finance often referred to as "Mitsubishi Village." Meanwhile, companies like Mitsubishi Chemical Group and Mitsubishi Materials Corporation became leaders in advanced materials and technology, supplying industries as diverse as electronics, healthcare, and renewable energy.

Yet, Mitsubishi has not been without its challenges. Scandals, such as Mitsubishi Motors' 2016 revelation of falsified fuel efficiency data, have tested public trust. The company's wartime legacy, particularly its use of forced labour, remains a sensitive issue. Still, Mitsubishi has shown a remarkable ability to adapt and evolve, leveraging its keiretsu structure to weather crises and invest in the future.


"MITSUBISHI HAS SHOWN A REMARKABLE ABILITY TO ADAPT AND EVOLVE, LEVERAGING ITS KEIRETSU STRUCTURE TO WEATHER CRISES AND INVEST IN THE FUTURE."

Today, Mitsubishi operates in virtually every sector imaginable, from automotive and chemicals to real estate, finance, and consumer goods. The group's influence extends far beyond Japan, with a global presence that generates revenues rivaling the GDPs of small nations. Yet, for all its modernity, Mitsubishi remains deeply rooted in its traditions. The three-diamond logo is more than a brand; it is a symbol of the group's enduring values: integrity, innovation, and resilience.

The keiretsu system, often misunderstood by outsiders, is central to Mitsubishi's identity. It is a structure that prioritises long-term relationships over short-term gains, creating a network that is both resilient and adaptable. While some critics argue that the system stifles competition and innovation, Mitsubishi's continued success suggests that this model still has much to offer in an era of globalisation and rapid technological change.

In tracing Mitsubishi's journey, one sees not just the history of a corporation but the story of modern Japan itself. From Yataro Iwasaki's modest shipping venture to the sprawling keiretsu of today, Mitsubishi has been a constant force for transformation. The three diamonds, forged in the crucible of Japan's industrialisation, continue to shine brightly, a testament to the power of ambition, collaboration, and reinvention.

"MITSUBISHI OPERATES IN VIRTUALLY EVERY SECTOR IMAGINABLE, FROM AUTOMOTIVE AND CHEMICALS TO REAL ESTATE, FINANCE, AND CONSUMER GOODS."

Image: Ichizawa Shinzaburo Hanpu

# A QUANTUM OF DECLINE

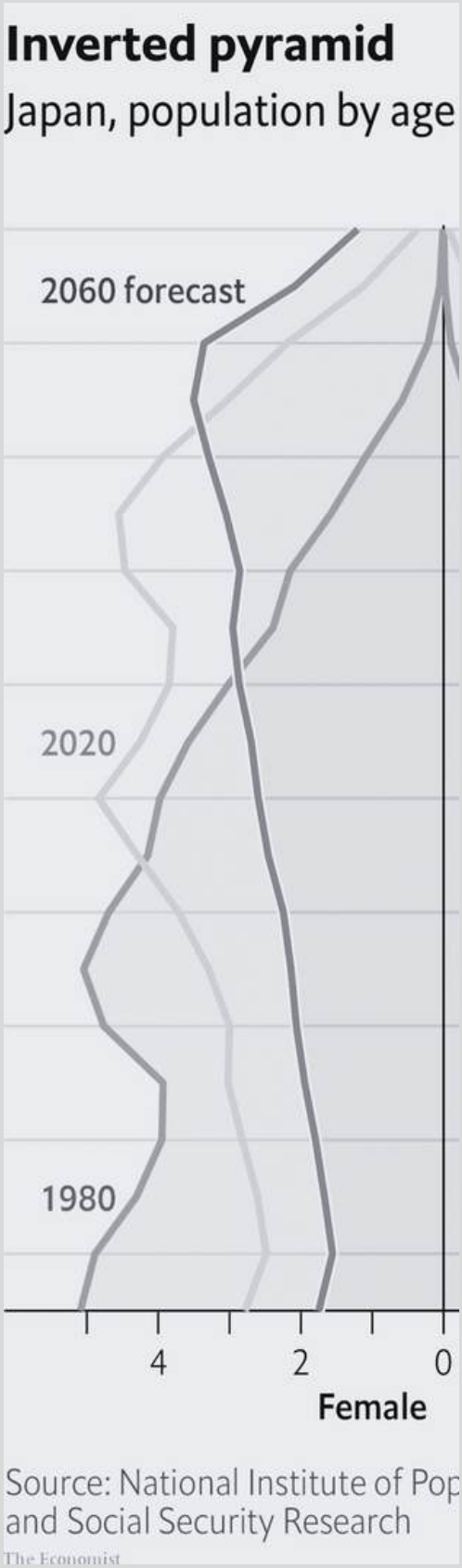
BY PAUL ASHTON

For more than a decade, Professor Hiroshi Yoshida of Tohoku University has been tracking the alarming decline in Japan's birthrate with his "conceptual clock," a sobering tool that projects when Japan might hypothetically have just one child under the age of 14. His annual reports, which blend demographic data with an urgent call for societal change, have recently drawn widespread attention. Included in The Japan Times and picked up by international media outlets, his latest analysis places this hypothetical moment in the year 2720, 695 years from now. Though the projection is symbolic, it underscores the stark reality: Japan is running out of children.


It's not just a demographic concern, it's a challenge to the very fabric of Japanese society. The country's birthrate has been in freefall for decades. In 2023, the fertility rate dropped to an all-time low of 1.20, and the number of births in 2024 was the lowest recorded since 1969. Despite numerous government interventions, from childcare subsidies to matchmaking apps, the trend seems irreversible. The numbers alone don't capture the full picture, though. Behind every statistic is a family, or a family that never formed, making choices in the face of immense cultural, economic, and societal pressures.

When I first arrived in Japan in 2001, I didn't think much about its demographic challenges. Like so many others, I was drawn by the culture, the opportunities, and the sheer allure of living in one of the world's most fascinating countries.

"BEHIND EVERY STATISTIC IS A FAMILY, OR A FAMILY THAT NEVER FORMED, MAKING CHOICES IN THE FACE OF IMMENSE CULTURAL, ECONOMIC, AND SOCIETAL PRESSURES."




Back then, my arrival added a small +1 to Japan's population, albeit as an immigrant. By 2007, I was married, and over the years, my spouse and I added three more to the population tally, our three amazing kids. That's a +4 if you're keeping track. But raising a family here has been eye-opening. It has revealed the complexities and barriers that make having children so challenging for so many, even for someone like me who came into parenthood with the benefit of financial stability and a lot of support.

Japan's birthrate crisis isn't just about numbers, it's about a culture where raising a family often feels like swimming against the tide. For many families, the waters are simply too rough. While the government has tried various strategies to reverse the trend, these measures fail to address the deeper cultural and structural barriers that deter many from starting or growing their families. What becomes clear, both from experience and observation, is that solutions will require a fundamental shift in how Japan views work, family, and society as a whole.

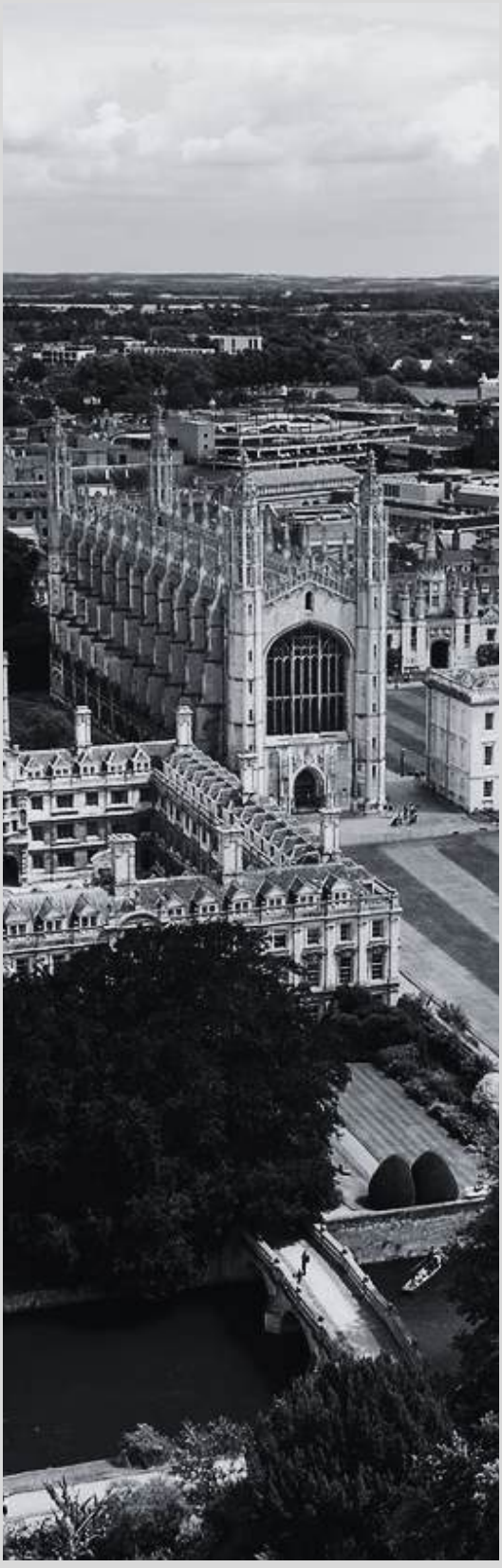
Then, of course, there's the financial reality of raising children. As a parent of three kids in Japan, I've felt this strain acutely. Let's break it down. Updated calculations show that raising a child through the public education system, from kindergarten through university, costs approximately ¥7.9 million. This figure includes three years of public kindergarten, six years of elementary school, three years of junior high, and three years of high school, plus four years at a public university.

For private education, the financial burden is significantly higher. The cost of private kindergarten through high school is approximately ¥18.4 million, and adding a private university brings the total to ¥23.2 million. This represents a difference of more than ¥15 million compared to public education.

"JAPAN'S BIRTHRATE CRISIS ISN'T JUST ABOUT NUMBERS, IT'S ABOUT A CULTURE WHERE RAISING A FAMILY OFTEN FEELS LIKE SWIMMING AGAINST THE TIDE."

These figures reflect not only tuition but also supplementary expenses like uniforms, extracurricular activities, and cram schools, which have become almost a necessity in Japan's competitive academic environment.

Comparing this to the United Kingdom, where I grew up, highlights just how unique Japan's challenges are. In the UK, public schooling is entirely free from ages 5 to 18, with parents only covering ancillary costs such as uniforms and extracurricular activities. For higher education, students pay tuition fees, but the government provides extensive loans to cover these costs, capped at £9,250 annually for most universities. Repayments are income-contingent, only starting when graduates earn above a certain threshold, and any remaining debt is written off after 30 years. While this system isn't without its critics, it does significantly reduce the financial barriers to accessing education. By comparison, Japan's lack of robust financial aid for higher education and its reliance on families to cover costs outright places an extraordinary burden on parents.



Such costs make the prospect of raising a family daunting for many young couples. Despite Japan being a wealthy nation, stagnating wages and rising living costs mean that even middle-income families struggle. For many, having children feels like a financial gamble they can't afford to take.

While Japan grapples with these issues, it's worth looking at how other nations have tackled similar challenges. South Korea, for instance, has an even lower fertility rate than Japan, just 0.78 in 2022. Like Japan, South Korea has introduced financial incentives, extended parental leave, and subsidies for childcare, but these measures have had limited

"DESPITE JAPAN BEING A WEALTHY NATION, STAGNATING WAGES AND RISING LIVING COSTS MEAN THAT EVEN MIDDLE-INCOME FAMILIES STRUGGLE."

success. Long working hours and traditional gender roles still deter many South Koreans from starting families.

In contrast, countries like Sweden and France have managed to sustain relatively high fertility rates through comprehensive family policies. Sweden offers generous parental leave, subsidised childcare, and flexible work arrangements, underpinned by a cultural commitment to gender equality. Fathers are encouraged, and in some cases, expected, to take paternity leave, making shared parenting a norm. France similarly provides robust support for families, including financial incentives and accessible childcare, which make raising children less of a burden.

Singapore, another country facing a demographic crisis, has implemented a mix of financial incentives and community-based programmes. Yet, even there, the high cost of living and demanding work culture have limited the effectiveness of these efforts. The lesson is clear: while financial support is necessary, it's not sufficient. People also need time, flexibility, and cultural shifts that make parenthood more feasible and appealing.

So, what could a uniquely Japanese solution look like? For one, it would need to address the intertwined issues of workplace culture and gender inequality. Imagine a Japan where the average workday ends at a reasonable hour, where men and women share parenting responsibilities equally, and where flexible work arrangements are the norm. These changes would require not just policy shifts but a rethinking of cultural values around work and family.

"IMAGINE A JAPAN WHERE THE AVERAGE WORKDAY ENDS AT A REASONABLE HOUR, WHERE MEN AND WOMEN SHARE PARENTING RESPONSIBILITIES EQUALLY."

Economic reforms would also be crucial. Raising wages, stabilising housing costs, and reducing the financial burden of education could make parenthood more attainable. Japan could look to Sweden, France, and even the UK for inspiration, adopting policies that create an environment where having children feels less risky and more rewarding.

Perhaps the most important change, however, would be a reframing of the narrative around parenthood. Instead of presenting the declining birthrate as a crisis, the government could celebrate the joys of raising children and highlight diverse family models. Campaigns that showcase the benefits of family life could help shift public perceptions and create a more positive outlook.

It's easy to feel overwhelmed by the statistics and projections. But as a parent living in Japan, I see hope in the small moments: in the joy of watching my kids play in the park, in the laughter of their school friends, in the resilience and creativity of a new generation. Japan has always been a nation that balances tradition with innovation. If any country can find a way to turn its demographic challenges into an opportunity, it's this one.

Professor Yoshida's clock may be ticking, but time is not up yet. Japan has the tools, the ingenuity, and the cultural depth to write a different story. The question is whether it will rise to the challenge and choose a path that secures not just its population but its future. For the sake of my kids, and for all the kids yet to come, I hope it does.

"AS A PARENT LIVING IN JAPAN, I SEE HOPE IN THE SMALL MOMENTS."

Image: PR Times

# WHO THE HELL IS YOSHIKO SHINOHARA?

BY PAUL ASHTON

In a country where tradition often dictates the path of progress, Yoshiko Shinohara built her own road, and then invited others to walk it. Born into a Japan still reeling from war and defined by rigid social hierarchies, Shinohara would go on to become Japan's first self-made female billionaire, a title that barely captures the magnitude of her impact. Her life is not just a story of corporate success but of quiet, determined revolution, a reshaping of how Japan views work, women, and the very concept of opportunity.

Today, her name is synonymous with power and philanthropy, but her beginnings were anything but promising. Born in 1934 in Kanagawa Prefecture, Shinohara was just eight years old when her father died, leaving her mother, a midwife, to raise five children alone. In that small household, resilience wasn't a choice; it was survival. Watching her mother work tirelessly left a deep impression on young Yoshiko, planting the seed of a belief that women were capable of balancing work and family, ambition and care. Yet post-war Japan offered little space for women to pursue meaningful careers. Girls were expected to marry, manage households, and gracefully disappear from professional life. For a time, Shinohara followed that script. She married young, worked in clerical roles, and checked the expected boxes, until she decided she wouldn't anymore.

Her brief marriage ended in divorce, a bold move in a conservative society, and one that alienated even her own family. It was in the aftermath of that decision that Shinohara realised she had to rewrite her life entirely. She left Japan in the 1960s to study abroad, spending time in Switzerland, the UK, and later Australia. It was in Sydney that she

"HER LIFE IS NOT JUST A STORY OF CORPORATE SUCCESS BUT OF QUIET, DETERMINED REVOLUTION."

stumbled upon the concept of temporary staffing. Companies routinely hired temporary workers to fill in for permanent employees, a practice foreign to Japan's corporate culture of lifetime employment. What seemed mundane in Australia struck Shinohara as revolutionary: here was a system that could offer women flexibility in the workforce, a way to balance professional aspirations with family obligations. She carried that spark of an idea back to Japan.

In 1973, at 38 years old, with no business plan and only 100,000 yen in capital, she founded Tempstaff, the company that would eventually evolve into today's Persol Holdings. She set up shop in a cramped, eight-tatami-mat apartment in Tokyo's Roppongi district, which doubled as her office and home. She had a desk, a telephone, and a vision. At a time when Japan's labour laws prohibited private companies from offering temporary staffing services, Shinohara's business was technically illegal. Bureaucrats at the Ministry of Labour frequently summoned her for questioning, and she operated with the constant fear of being shut down, or worse, arrested. Yet, she persisted, driven by a conviction that businesses needed flexibility and that women deserved more opportunities.

Her first clients were foreign banks and multinational companies, less bound by Japan's traditional employment practices. To drum up business, she pounded the pavement, distributing flyers and pitching services directly to executives. At night, to make ends meet, she taught English to businessmen. Success was neither quick nor guaranteed. But she was patient, recognising that cultural change moves slowly.

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

In 1986, after years of lobbying by Shinohara and other industry pioneers, the Japanese government passed the Worker Dispatch Law, finally legalising private-sector temporary staffing. It was a vindication of her belief in the model and marked the beginning of an era of explosive growth for her company. Yet, even then, she recognised that staying still was not an option. In the late 1980s, as growth began to plateau, she made another controversial decision, this time, within her own company. Tempstaff had been founded as a company for women, run by women. But Shinohara saw that her all-female management team was becoming risk-averse, more focused on protecting what they had than pursuing new markets. Despite resistance, she began hiring men to balance the company's leadership. It worked. Sales rebounded, and Tempstaff expanded into new sectors.

The 1990s, often referred to as Japan's "Lost Decade" due to economic stagnation, paradoxically created fertile ground for Tempstaff. As companies sought to cut costs, temporary staffing emerged as a practical solution. By 2006, Tempstaff had gone public on the Tokyo Stock Exchange, and in 2008, it merged with People Staff to form Temp Holdings, later rebranded as Persol Holdings. What started as a one-woman operation was now a multinational enterprise, a leader in human resources solutions across Asia and beyond.

But Yoshiko Shinohara's legacy cannot be measured by corporate milestones alone. In 2014, recognising the profound social challenges Japan faced, an ageing population, a shrinking workforce, and the undervaluation of caregiving

"SHINOHARA SAW THAT HER ALL-FEMALE MANAGEMENT TEAM WAS BECOMING RISK-AVERSE, MORE FOCUSED ON PROTECTING WHAT THEY HAD THAN PURSUING NEW MARKETS."

professions, she turned her focus to philanthropy. She founded the Yoshiko Shinohara Memorial Foundation, dedicating vast sums of her personal wealth to funding scholarships for students pursuing careers in childcare and eldercare. These fields, often dismissed as "women's work," are vital to Japan's future, and Shinohara knew it.

Her philanthropy extended beyond Japan. In 2023, she and her foundation donated 1.3 billion yen to Harvard Business School to establish the Yoshiko & Yoshimi Shinohara Fellowship Fund. The fund was designed to support Japanese students pursuing MBAs, providing them access to global business knowledge and leadership training. For Shinohara, it wasn't simply about charity, it was about investing in the future of Japan's economy. She understood that education and global exposure were key to cultivating the next generation of innovators and leaders.

By the time Forbes recognised her as Japan's first self-made female billionaire, Shinohara had already redefined what success meant. She hadn't chased wealth for its own sake. She built Tempstaff because she saw a need and had the courage to meet it. The wealth, the recognition, and the influence followed naturally. Yet even as she amassed extraordinary financial success, she remained grounded in her core belief: that work is a source of dignity and empowerment.

Her journey was not without setbacks. In 1998, a devastating data breach exposed the personal information of 90,000 female registrants, a crisis that rocked Tempstaff and

"SHE HADN'T CHASED WEALTH FOR ITS OWN SAKE. SHE BUILT TEMPSTAFF BECAUSE SHE SAW A NEED AND HAD THE COURAGE TO MEET IT."


the broader industry. Shinohara publicly apologised and took responsibility, implementing reforms to rebuild trust. It was a painful chapter but one that underscored her belief that leadership is not about perfection but accountability.

Reflecting on her life, it's clear that Shinohara's most profound impact was not in building a billion-dollar company but in fundamentally changing how Japan thinks about work, gender, and opportunity. She dismantled the idea that ambition was a male trait and that caregiving was a female burden. She didn't just break the glass ceiling, she built a new house altogether, with doors wide open for those who came after her.

In an era where Japan faces mounting economic and demographic challenges, the systems Shinohara pioneered, a flexible, inclusive workforce, a respect for caregiving professions, and a belief in lifelong learning, are more relevant than ever.

Yoshiko Shinohara's story is not simply one of individual achievement. It is a story of societal transformation. From that small apartment in Roppongi to the towering offices of Persol Holdings, from late-night English lessons to billion-yen philanthropic endowments, she has shown that real power is not just about leading but about lifting others.

She became Japan's first self-made female billionaire not because she chased wealth, but because she chased change. And in doing so, she changed everything.

"SHE DISMANTLED THE IDEA THAT AMBITION WAS A MALE TRAIT AND THAT CAREGIVING WAS A FEMALE BURDEN."

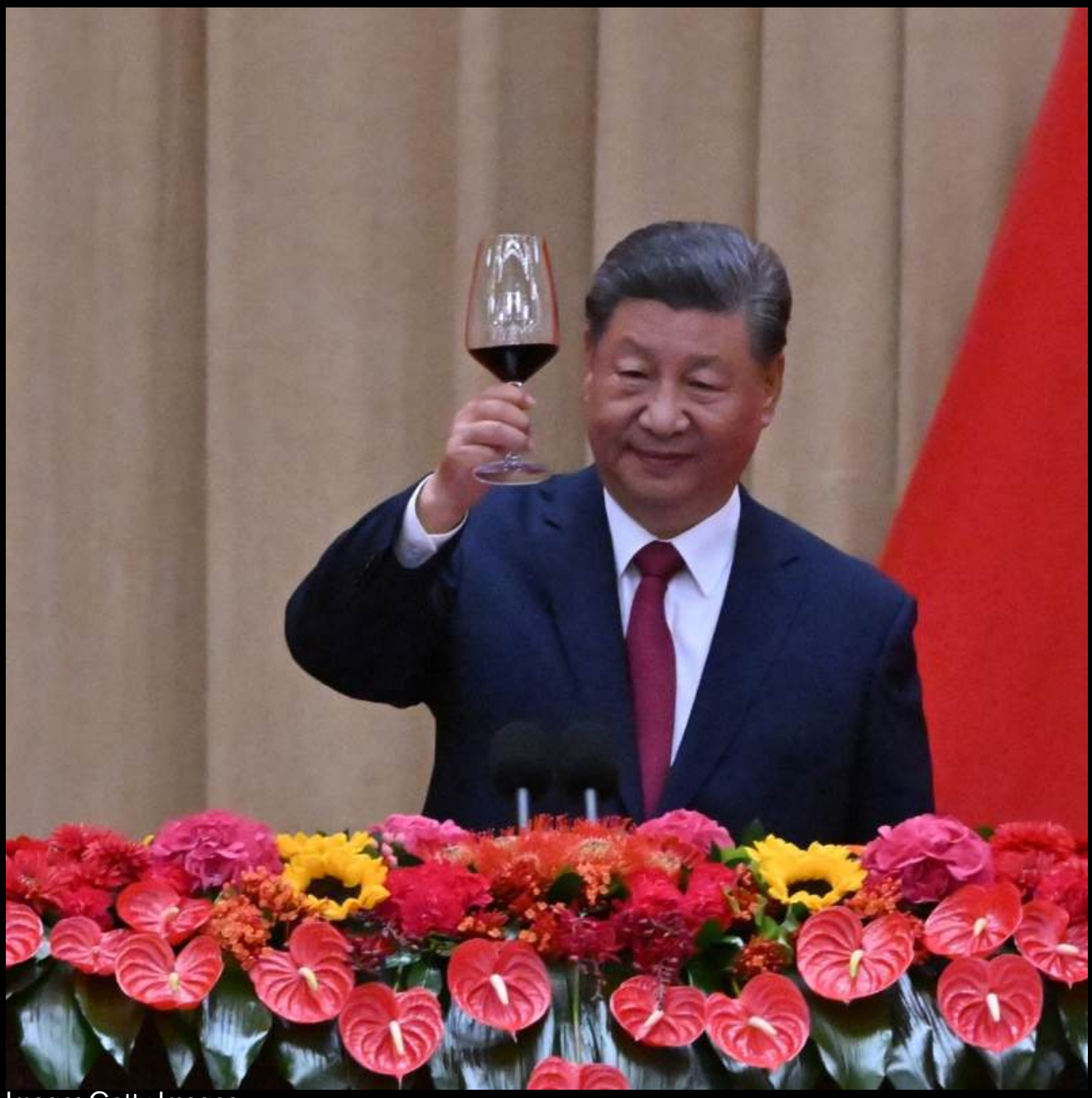


Image: Getty Images

# BENEATH THE QUIET EXODUS

BY PAUL ASHTON

Migration has always been a double-edged act of rebellion and hope, a defiant leap into the unknown in search of something better. Every wave carries its own baggage of dreams and anxieties, but today, in East Asia, a new and fascinating chapter is unfolding. Affluent Chinese are leaving their homeland in growing numbers, quietly rewriting the relationship between China and Japan in ways that are both transformative and deeply revealing.

This is no rags-to-riches migration tale. These are the elite: wealthy professionals, entrepreneurs, and families who once seemed perfectly positioned to thrive in China's era of meteoric economic rise. But they aren't fleeing famine or chaos, they're fleeing the suffocating predictability of life under an increasingly repressive regime. Their wealth may insulate them from many of the daily struggles of ordinary Chinese citizens, but it also gives them the means to make a very specific choice: to leave.

And leave they have, in a migration wave that has inspired books like Run Ri: Tracing the Affluent Chinese Fleeing to Japan by Masutomo Yudai. Released on January 22nd, 2025, the book examines the motivations and impacts of this exodus. The title, Run Ri (潤日), is a clever wordplay on the Chinese character for "profit" or "enrichment," which also doubles as a homophone for the English word "run." It captures both the material success these individuals are seeking to preserve and the act of escaping from a system that no longer aligns with their aspirations.

"THEY AREN'T FLEEING FAMINE OR CHAOS, THEY'RE FLEEING THE SUFFOCATING PREDICTABILITY OF LIFE UNDER AN INCREASINGLY REPRESSIVE REGIME."


For many, Japan has emerged as the destination of choice, not because it promises the unbridled freedoms of the West, but because it offers a more measured stability. Politically calm, culturally familiar, and geographically close to China, Japan provides a subtle kind of freedom. Wealthy Chinese families invest in Japanese real estate, enroll their children in its schools, and navigate immigration systems that are surprisingly accessible to those with enough cash and clout.

But this is no purely economic migration. There's a deeper, more existential driver at play: a quiet desperation to escape a future where invisible shackles bind ambition, speech, and creativity. President Xi Jinping's tightening grip on power has ushered in an era of relentless crackdowns on dissent and stricter ideological control. Even among those who don't openly oppose the regime, there's a growing fear that being wealthy and independent might paint a target on your back. To leave is not just to seek opportunity, it's to hedge against an uncertain future.

Japan represents a compromise of sorts. It's orderly, prosperous, and technologically advanced, but it also maintains a cultural continuity that feels familiar to many Chinese migrants. Unlike the chaos and brash individualism of the West, Japan offers an environment that balances modernity with harmony. For those unwilling to sever ties with China completely, it's also close enough to allow for frequent travel and business connections.

“THERE'S A DEEPER, MORE EXISTENTIAL DRIVER AT PLAY: A QUIET DESPERATION TO ESCAPE A FUTURE WHERE INVISIBLE SHACKLES BIND AMBITION, SPEECH, AND CREATIVITY.”

At the same time, this migration has not gone unnoticed. Affluent Chinese have become a visible force in cities like Tokyo and Osaka, driving up real estate prices and establishing businesses that serve both locals and the expat community. Books like Run Ri dive deep into this phenomenon, exploring everything from the underground banking routes used to smuggle wealth into Japan to the development of exclusive Chinese-run clubs in Ginza and resorts in Hokkaido. It's an economic shift that Japan can't ignore, even if it comes with its own cultural complexities.

But not all is as idyllic as it seems. For all the freedom that Japan offers, many of these migrants remain haunted by the long reach of Beijing. Even across borders, the Chinese government has ways of making its presence felt. Dissidents and critics living in Japan report eerie phone calls, cryptic social media messages, and even threats directed at family members still in China. A recent Human Rights Watch report exposed the chilling ways Beijing harasses its citizens abroad, using fear and intimidation to keep them in check.

Journalist Julian Ryall's Deutsche Welle interview with "D," a Chinese writer and translator living in Japan, paints a stark picture of this lingering fear. Though she fled China years ago, D remains tethered to its grip. Chinese authorities have repeatedly visited her elderly mother back home, delivering warnings thinly veiled as polite requests. "They told her to tell me not to write articles that 'aren't true,'" D says. "Their tactics are cunning, and I cannot truly say I feel safe, even in Japan." D, who translated the works of Nobel


"FOR ALL THE FREEDOM THAT JAPAN OFFERS, MANY OF THESE MIGRANTS REMAIN HAUNTED BY THE LONG REACH OF BEIJING."

laureate Liu Xiaobo and writes about topics like Tibet and the Cultural Revolution, says the Chinese government sees her as an "anachronism", a term they use to describe dissidents who refuse to align with the state.

D's story is not unique. Exiled Tibetans, Uyghurs, and Inner Mongolians in Japan face similar harassment. Public security officials routinely threaten families back home, leveraging fear to silence critics abroad. In some cases, Chinese nationals in Japan have been approached by agents asking them to spy on their compatriots. For those who left China to breathe freely, the air still carries the faint scent of the regime they sought to escape.

For Japan, this wave of migration is a double-edged sword. On one hand, it brings economic benefits, cultural diversity, and an infusion of wealth. But it also highlights the growing challenge of dealing with transnational repression. Advocacy groups have called on the Japanese government to do more to protect Chinese dissidents, but official responses have been muted at best. Japan's proximity to China and its cautious approach to immigration make it a unique case, an unexpected sanctuary for the fleeing wealthy, but also a front line in Beijing's quiet war on dissent.

The story of affluent Chinese migrants in Japan is more than a tale of personal ambition, it's a reflection of the shifting dynamics of power in East Asia. Their exodus underscores the cracks in China's once-unshakable rise, as well as the enduring

"CHINESE NATIONALS IN JAPAN HAVE BEEN APPROACHED BY AGENTS ASKING THEM TO SPY ON THEIR COMPATRIOTS."

appeal of Japan as a haven of order and prosperity. But it also raises questions about the cost of freedom in an interconnected world, where even those who leave cannot fully escape the shadows of authoritarianism.

At its heart, this migration is a human story, one of hope, caution, and defiance. It's about people using their privilege to chart a new path, but also about the resilience of systems that seek to control even those who have left. Books like Run Ri offer a lens into this complex reality, exploring not just the visible impacts on Japan's society and economy, but the unseen battles being waged in the lives of those who fled.

This quiet exodus is still unfolding, but its ripples are already being felt across borders. For China, it's a critique of a system that thrives on control at the expense of innovation and freedom. For Japan, it's an opportunity to redefine its role in a world increasingly shaped by migration and interconnectedness. And for the migrants themselves, it's a reminder that the pursuit of freedom is never as simple as crossing a border. The shadows of the past have a way of following you, but so does the determination to build a brighter future.

"THIS MIGRATION IS A HUMAN STORY, ONE OF HOPE, CAUTION, AND DEFIANCE."

Image: Tama

# THE ART OF BEING RIDICULOUSLY RELATABLE

BY PAUL ASHTON

It seems like everything, from government departments to train stations, has a face in Japan, and often a fuzzy, cartoonish one at that. Mascots, or 'yuru-chara', a contraction of 'yurui' (light-hearted or laid-back) mascot character as they're affectionately called, are more than cute symbols of civic pride or corporate branding; they're an integral part of how Japan communicates, softens formality, and builds connection. From the bizarre antics of rogue mascots to their roles as bridges between institutions and the public, mascots embody a uniquely Japanese blend of absurdity, charm, and cultural significance.

But to believe that mascots in Japan are just some modern fad, or are just a purely meaningless part of 'weird Japan', would be a mistake. Their roots actually stretch back centuries to Japan's long tradition of anthropomorphism in art and folklore. The 12th-century Chōjū-giga scrolls, often called Japan's first manga, famously depict animals, frogs, rabbits, and monkeys engaging in human-like activities, from sumo wrestling to gossiping. Later, folklore around 'tsukumogami', household objects that become sentient after a hundred years, reinforced this idea that the non-human world could hold personality, charm, and even a touch of mischief.

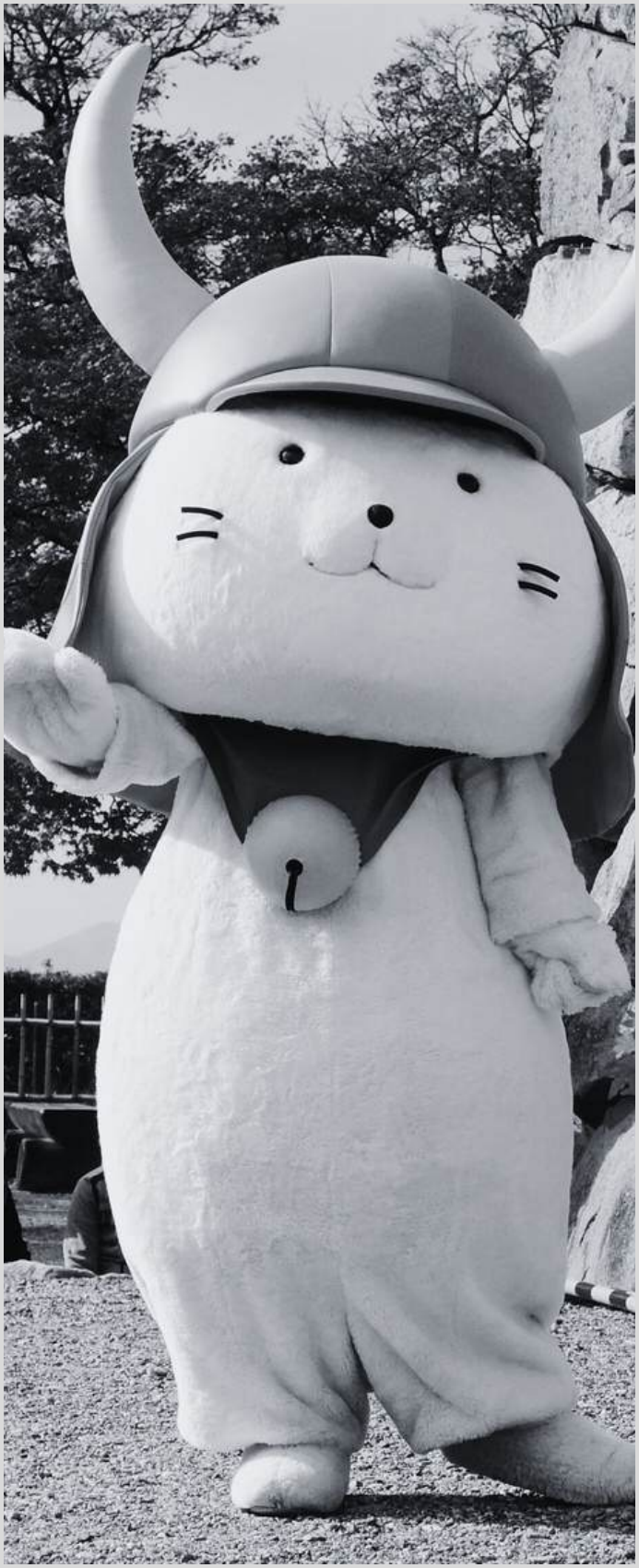
By the 20th century, these cultural tendencies found new life in corporate branding and public campaigns. Sanrio's Hello Kitty, introduced in 1974, showed how anthropomorphic characters could create emotional bonds that transcended language and age. Around the same time, public

"THE ROOTS STRETCH BACK CENTURIES TO JAPAN'S LONG TRADITION OF ANTHROPOMORPHISM IN ART AND FOLKLORE."

institutions began using mascots to communicate their missions. Japan's 1964 Olympics introduced mascots to promote environmental awareness, and the 1970 Osaka Expo showcased the cheerful Expo Boy, signalling a shift toward mascots as tools of communication rather than just decoration.

But the yuru-chara boom as we know it didn't begin until the early 2000s. It was a white cat in a samurai helmet that changed everything. Hikonyan, created in 2007 to commemorate the 400th anniversary of Hikone Castle, set a new precedent. Cute but with a narrative rooted in local history (the helmet referencing a famous warlord), Hikonyan drew massive crowds, revitalising tourism in Hikone. His success inspired other towns, organisations, and even niche causes to create their own mascots.

Mascots thrive in Japan because they address a specific cultural need: bridging the gap between formality and approachability. Japanese society places high value on politeness and subtlety, even in professional or bureaucratic contexts, which can make official communications feel distant or dry. Enter the mascots. They deliver messages in a way that's accessible, charming, and disarming, whether it's a smiling bear encouraging you to pay your taxes or a blue-suited dog reminding you to avoid cybercrime. Mascots make the impersonal personal,



"IT WAS A WHITE CAT IN A SAMURAI HELMET THAT CHANGED EVERYTHING."

transforming institutions into something softer and friendlier.

Take Kumamon, Japan's most famous mascot, as an example. Created in 2010 to promote tourism in Kumamoto Prefecture, the plump black bear with perpetually surprised eyes and rosy cheeks became a national icon almost overnight. Kumamon wasn't just an economic success, generating billions of yen in merchandise and tourism revenue, but a cultural one. Following Kumamoto's devastating earthquakes in 2016, he became a symbol of resilience and hope, showing up at recovery events and spreading joy to affected communities.

Yet, for all the warm fuzzies mascots inspire, they also have a wild side, none more so than Chiitan, an unofficial mascot who became an internet sensation for its chaotic antics. Chiitan is a 0-year-old "fairy baby" otter wearing a turtle as a hat (naturally) and is unaffiliated with Susaki, the coastal town it ostensibly represents. While the town's official mascot is Shinjo-kun, a much tamer otter with a ramen bowl on his head, Chiitan quickly eclipsed Shinjo-kun with bizarre videos of mischief: pole dancing, flipping a car, and fighting inflatable objects with an umbrella.

Chiitan's antics garnered millions of fans online, but they also caused headaches for Susaki officials, who reportedly received over 100 complaints about the rogue mascot's behaviour. In an ironic twist, the city cut ties with the real-life otter that inspired Chiitan, its official tourism

"KUMAMON WASN'T JUST AN ECONOMIC SUCCESS, GENERATING BILLIONS OF YEN IN MERCHANDISE AND TOURISM REVENUE, BUT A CULTURAL ONE."

ambassador, because of the public backlash tied to the mascot. As John Oliver famously explained on Last Week Tonight, "The city cut ties with the real otter because of the things the fake otter did."

Oliver, ever the opportunist, couldn't resist wading into the absurdity of mascot culture. In 2019, he introduced Chiijohn, a new mascot he created to comfort Shinjo-kun in his time of need. Chiijohn, described as a "41-year-old nearsighted English fairy baby," joined Shinjo-kun in a heartwarming video as they explored Susaki, ate fish, and generally filled the Chiitan-shaped hole in Shinjo-kun's life. In a surprising twist, Susaki officials embraced the parody, adopting Chiijohn as an honorary mascot. The episode captured both the silliness and the sincerity of Japan's mascot obsession, where even an unsanctioned coked-up otter and a British satire can turn into a story about community.

Another viral mascot who proves that absurdity has no limits is Nyango Star, a death-metal drummer from Aomori Prefecture. A literal mashup of a cat and an apple (a nod to Aomori's famous fruit), Nyango Star defies the kawaii stereotype with jaw-dropping drum solos. His videos, which juxtapose his fluffy exterior with his virtuosic musical ability, have made him a YouTube and TikTok star. Nyango Star is proof that mascots don't just inhabit a world of smiles, they can shred, too.

"NYANGO STAR IS PROOF THAT MASCOTS DON'T JUST INHABIT A WORLD OF SMILES, THEY CAN SHRED, TOO."

While some mascots soar to global stardom, others languish in obscurity or fade into memory. Oversaturation became a problem during the height of the yuru-chara boom, with the annual Yuru-Chara Grand Prix, a nationwide mascot popularity contest, highlighting the sheer volume of new characters. By the late 2010s, towns and organisations were churning out mascots in the hope of creating the next Kumamon, resulting in a glut of designs that were often formulaic or forgettable. The Grand Prix, which ran until 2020, showcased the creativity and chaos of mascot culture, but it also underscored the risks of treating mascots as purely commercial ventures.

Yet, despite criticisms of oversaturation, mascots remain deeply woven into the fabric of Japanese life. They show up everywhere, from local festivals to disaster preparedness campaigns, and even during global crises. During the COVID-19 pandemic, mascots pivoted to socially distanced events and online appearances, spreading messages about handwashing and mask-wearing. Funassyi, the hyperactive pear fairy mascot of Funabashi City, became an unlikely hero, cheering up audiences with videos that combined public health tips with his usual chaotic charm.

When it comes down to it, mascots are more than just fluffy faces. They're storytellers, symbols of resilience, and sometimes even agents of chaos. They embody Japan's ability to find joy in the mundane and make even the most serious topics approachable. Whether it's a tax campaign, a tourism push, or a rogue otter flipping a car, mascots remind us that life is better when it's a little absurd. So the next time you see a grinning bear or a drumming apple-cat mascot in the wild in Japan, just remember:
It's not just cute. It's culture.

"THEY SHOW UP EVERYWHERE, FROM LOCAL FESTIVALS TO DISASTER PREPAREDNESS CAMPAIGNS, AND EVEN DURING GLOBAL CRISES."

Image: The Japan News

# RESILIENCE ON THE EDGE OF INEVITABILITY

BY PAUL ASHTON

The first time I felt the earth tremble beneath me, I was on the 30th floor of a hotel in Osaka, with my then future wife. A “minor quake”, as she nonchalantly assured me while rolling over for more sleep, but to me, a Brit from a country that barely registers tremors, it felt apocalyptic. Naked and panicked, I jumped out of bed, and tried to usher my wife out of the room. She looked at me like an isolated Amazonian tribe might look at someone during first contact. Eventually, as the tremor abated, I stood frozen and still butt naked, my imagination filling in for a world-ending disaster that never came. In the UK, earthquakes are footnotes in history, anomalies that barely touch the fabric of daily life. Contrast that with Japan, where the ground stirs with regularity just to remind you who’s really in charge.

My wife’s experience of earthquakes couldn’t be more different. She was in Kobe in 1995 when the Great Hanshin Earthquake struck. At university then, she walked for kilometres through a city that was no longer the one she had known. Streets she had walked every day were now scarred with fire and rubble. She passed buildings that had crumbled into the streets and, tragically, covered bodies awaiting collection. Her memories are painted in flames, ash, and a stunned silence that took years to fade.

Sixteen years later, I witnessed the aftermath of the Great East Japan Earthquake of 2011. While I wasn’t there during the disaster, I joined a group of restaurateurs two months later to assist in evacuation centres in Higashi Matsushima, Miyagi. We drove 1,000 kilometres with everything we needed, water, gas, even portable toilets, because we couldn’t burden the devastated local infrastructure. Locals approached us to share

“NAKED AND PANICKED, I JUMPED OUT OF BED, AND TRIED TO USHER MY WIFE OUT OF THE ROOM.”

stories of profound loss between cooking and serving meals. The lives of their loved ones and friends and their homes and dreams had been obliterated in minutes by a tsunami that surged through with merciless power.

I tried to hold myself together, but the scale of their suffering was staggering. On the way home, we stopped in Minami Sanriku, a town where the tsunami had erased nearly everything. Standing in what had been its bustling centre, I looked up at the mountains framing the valley, trying to grasp the unfathomable volume of water that had raged through weeks before. My mind couldn't process it. I broke down in tears from the weight of the overwhelming scene I witnessed. The human brain, it seems, is not built to comprehend such scales.

These memories resurfaced thanks to the recent news that the chance of the Nanaki earthquake hitting in the next 30 years has been upgraded to an 80% chance. Let me give some details for readers who have not heard of this periodic earthquake. The Nankai Trough is a deep oceanic trench running from Suruga Bay near Shizuoka to the Nansei Islands, where the Philippine Sea Plate is subducting beneath the Eurasian Plate. This subduction zone accumulates immense geological stress over decades, which is released catastrophically in the form of megathrust earthquakes. The region is infamous for producing some of the largest and most destructive earthquakes in Japan's history.

What makes the Nankai Trough earthquakes particularly terrifying is their relative regularity. Over the past 1,000 years, records meticulously maintained by Japanese chroniclers show that these events occur approximately every 105 years.

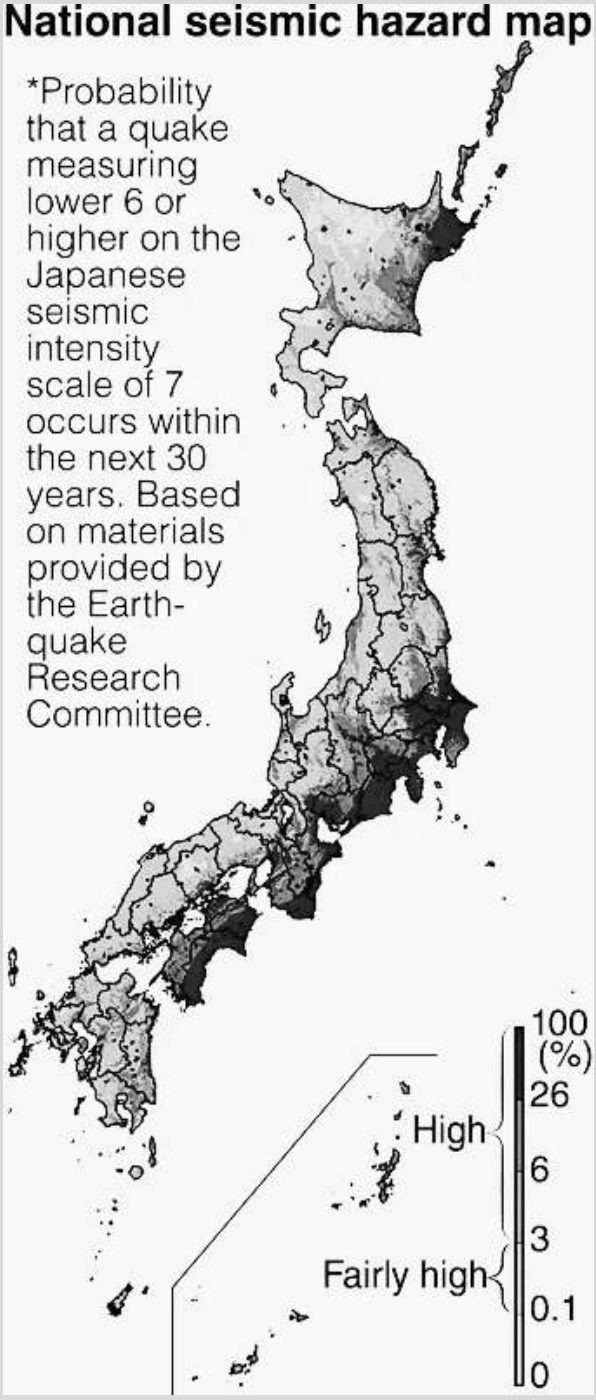
"MY MIND COULDN'T PROCESS IT. I BROKE DOWN IN TEARS FROM THE WEIGHT OF THE OVERWHELMING SCENE I WITNESSED."

The first recorded Nankai Trough earthquake dates back to 684 AD, detailed to the day on the Gregorian calendar. Since then, 13 events have been recorded, with magnitudes averaging 8.22.

This geological clockwork feels like the tick-tock of a well-serviced watch. On a human timescale, centuries may blur into eternity, but on a geological scale, the Nankai Trough is unnervingly punctual. The last significant event occurred in 1946, meaning that the region is now well within the expected timeframe for the next rupture.

The tsunamis alone could reach heights exceeding 30 metres in some areas, racing ashore within minutes of the initial quake. Kuroshio Town in Kōchi Prefecture, for instance, anticipates waves as high as 34.4 metres, higher than most buildings in the area. These waves wouldn't just obliterate coastal communities; they would surge into the heart of Japan's industrial and urban centres. Osaka, a low-lying city with vast underground infrastructure, could become a waterlogged labyrinth. Kobe and Nagoya, critical to Japan's trade and manufacturing, would be similarly overwhelmed.

The aftermath of a Nankai Trough earthquake will not end with the initial shaking or tsunami. Aftershocks, often significant in scale, will ripple through the region for months, if not years, compounding the devastation. Following the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, Japan recorded more than 14,000 aftershocks over the next year. Among these, 1,046 were magnitude 5 or greater, and an alarming 81 aftershocks reached magnitude 6 or above. These aftershocks caused additional damage to already weakened buildings, further disrupted recovery efforts, and exacerbated the psychological toll on survivors.




"ON A HUMAN TIMESCALE, CENTURIES MAY BLUR INTO ETERNITY, BUT ON A GEOLOGICAL SCALE, THE NANKAI TROUGH IS UNNERVINGLY PUNCTUAL."


For the Nankai Trough, aftershocks are likely to follow a similar pattern. The initial megathrust earthquake could trigger a series of large quakes along adjacent fault segments or even entirely separate regions, such as Tokai, Tonankai or Kanto. This cascading effect could prolong the disaster's impact across multiple prefectures, making recovery even more arduous.

The 2011 earthquake also demonstrated how aftershocks can prolong a region's vulnerability to further tsunamis. While the largest waves typically follow the initial quake, subsequent tremors can generate smaller but still deadly surges. This extended period of uncertainty will heighten the need for vigilance and preparedness for coastal communities in areas like Kochi, Tokushima, Wakayama, Miyazaki, Kagoshima, Osaka, Mie and Nagoya.

In western Japan, where my wife's family roots run deep, I have spent years preparing for this eventuality. My emergency kit rivals that of any prepper, packed with food, water, medical supplies, and tools. I have planned for 1 week of everything for my family of 5 and a dog. I have a lock box along with other families at the local evacuation centre, with my evacuation supplies split 50/50 between my house and there. This might seem like overkill to some, but I feel it's a necessity when you know you're standing on borrowed time. Yet, despite all this preparation, I have an inescapable feeling of helplessness that nags in the back of my mind. It's like seeing a bus careening toward you in slow motion, but being unable to step aside until after the moment of impact.

Perhaps this resignation is a uniquely human response to inevitability. Japan, a country shaped

"THE INITIAL MEGATHRUST EARTHQUAKE COULD TRIGGER A SERIES OF LARGE QUAKES ALONG ADJACENT FAULT SEGMENTS"

by seismic and volcanic forces, embodies this duality. There's a stoic acceptance of nature's power here and a quiet determination to rebuild and recover. In the aftermath of disasters, the Japanese exhibit a remarkable ability to organise, support one another, and restore their communities. It's as though resilience is embedded in the country's cultural DNA, a legacy of living with the earth's unpredictability. It should not be a surprise when the Nankai Trough earthquake finally strikes. Its approach is as certain as the sunrise. What remains uncertain is how we will navigate the chaos it brings. My wife's memories of Kobe, my experiences in Tōhoku, and the knowledge of what's to come all serve as reminders that the ground beneath us is never truly still. We are all waiting, whether we admit it or not, for the tremor that will change everything. Until then, we prepare, we hope, and we stand together, resilient on the edge of the inevitable.

Preparing for the Nankai Trough Earthquake: A Guide to Readiness
Preparation is essential in a nation as seismically active as Japan. Experts recommend several practical measures to ensure safety and survival when the Nankai Trough earthquake strikes; information from the Japan Meteorological Agency.

1. Emergency Kits: Keep a well-stocked emergency kit with food, water, flashlights, a first-aid kit, batteries, radios, and essential medicines. Pack items for three days at minimum, including pet supplies if necessary.
2. Evacuation Plans: Familiarise yourself with local hazard maps, evacuation routes, and designated shelters. If you live in a coastal area, identify high ground and plan how to reach it within minutes.
3. Home Safety: Secure furniture and appliances to prevent them from falling. Install glass film to reduce shattering and use safety latches on cupboards. If possible, invest in seismic retrofitting for your home.
4. Family Communication: Develop a family communication plan, including an out-of-area contact person, to ensure everyone knows what to do during a disaster.
5. Earthquake Alerts: Pay attention to government-issued alerts, including the "Nankai Trough Earthquake Temporary Information" system, which provides updates on potential seismic activity and recommended precautions.
6. Tsunami Awareness: If you feel strong shaking or see the sea recede suddenly, evacuate immediately. Do not wait for official warnings.
7. Community Preparedness: Participate in local earthquake drills and disaster planning. Japan emphasises community-based preparedness, ensuring collective safety through shared knowledge and cooperation.

Preparedness is the key to survival in the face of such inevitabilities. It is not just about saving lives during the event but also about ensuring a faster, stronger recovery in its aftermath.

"WHAT REMAINS UNCERTAIN IS HOW WE WILL NAVIGATE THE CHAOS IT BRINGS."

Image: The Japan Times

# NOW READ THIS! LOST JAPAN

BY PAUL ASHTON

The first book I ever read about Japan wasn't Lost Japan, Alex Kerr's evocative ode to a vanishing culture. It was the Lonely Planet guidebook, a practical resource that sketched out what life might be like in Marugame, a quiet town on Shikoku Island that was about to become my new home. I learned about its 500-year-old castle, its modern art museum, and its location on the shores of the Seto Inland Sea. In my mind, these descriptions shimmered with romance: castles, art, and the sea, strung together like pearls on a necklace. It was just enough to stoke the imagination of someone standing on the brink of the unknown, ready to leap into it.

A month or two before stepping off the plane in October 2001, leaving behind the predictable comforts of home for the uncertainty of a 20-something expat's life, I read my second book about Japan: Lost Japan. But this wasn't just a book; it was a doorway. Kerr's words opened onto a Japan that still felt impossibly distant and yet strangely familiar.

Unlike the bullet-point practicality of a guidebook, Kerr's narrative unspooled as a rich, poetic, and urgent tapestry, filled with longing that seemed written for someone like me, someone on the verge of entering an extraordinary, bewildering world. This was not the polished, futuristic Japan of bullet trains and neon lights, nor the quaint Japan of cherry blossoms and geisha rituals performed for unseen audiences. Instead, Kerr revealed a Japan both sublime and crumbling, suspended between the weight of its ancient history and the inexorable pull of modernity.

As I read, I felt like Kerr was handing me a set of keys, each one opening a new door. I learned about his discovery of the Iya Valley, a hidden

"THIS WASN'T JUST A BOOK; IT WAS A DOORWAY. KERR'S WORDS OPENED ONTO A JAPAN THAT STILL FELT IMPOSSIBLY DISTANT AND YET STRANGELY FAMILIAR."

world of deep mountain gorges and thatched-roof farmhouses, where the pace of life seemed tied to rhythms older than time itself. Iya would later become more than a name in a book for me; it would become my retreat, a place to escape to during Golden Week fishing trips and lazy summer weekends. My wife's furusato, her ancestral home, is in central Shikoku, just a stone's throw from Iya, and over the years, that winding road into the mountains has become as familiar to me as my own backyard once was. There's a holiday home there now, tucked into the hills, where we return to drink in the stillness of a landscape that feels suspended between eras.

Reading about Kerr's efforts to save and restore an old farmhouse there, his Chiiori, the "House of the Flute", felt personal in a way I couldn't have predicted at the time. It was a story of preservation and care, an act of resistance against the tide of time and decay. When I finally stood on the soil of the Iya Valley myself, I understood why he fought so hard for it. It isn't just beautiful; it's timeless. The narrow roads cling to steep cliffs; the mist curls around the mountains, and the old houses, dark and stoic, seem to rise organically from the earth itself. Kerr's descriptions had painted it vividly, but to be there, to stand on those gorges, to feel the cold rush of the river cutting through the valley, was to step directly into the pages of Lost Japan.

What struck me then, and continues to haunt me, is the fragility of it all. Kerr had captured not just the beauty of these places but their precariousness. It's a theme that resonated deeply with me as I began to see the contradictions of modern Japan for myself. Kerr's frustration with Japan's unrelenting drive for progress, the concrete rivers, the endless telephone wires, the uniformity of its urban sprawl, rang louder with every new town I visited. Even in Marugame, with its storied castle and the shimmering Seto Inland Sea nearby, the creeping sameness of modern Japan was hard to ignore.

"WHEN I FINALLY STOOD ON THE SOIL OF THE IYA VALLEY MYSELF, I UNDERSTOOD WHY HE FOUGHT SO HARD FOR IT."

And yet, like Kerr, I found myself captivated by the threads of tradition that still held on, often in unexpected places. Kerr's vivid descriptions of the tea ceremony, kabuki theatre, and calligraphy were more than academic, they were personal. He wrote as someone who had lived these traditions, who had forged connections with the people who carried them forward. His friendship with Bandō Tamasaburō, the onnagata actor, felt less like a brush with celebrity and more like a testament to the power of art to build bridges across cultures and time.

When I arrived in Japan, I was wide-eyed and eager, ready to be swept up in the "mists of history." But his book also prepared me for the dissonance. He didn't shy away from the cracks in the façade, the environmental destruction, the rigid social hierarchies, the ways in which Japan often seemed to turn its back on its own treasures. He wrote with the voice of someone who loved a place so much he couldn't bear to see it slip away, and that tension, the push and pull of admiration and critique, helped me navigate my own complicated feelings about my new home.

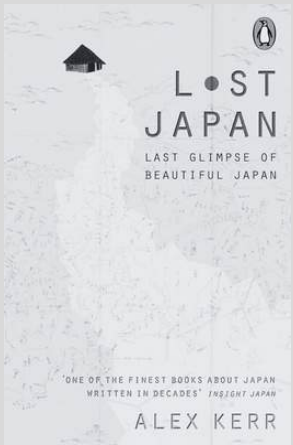
Over the years, as I settled into life in Japan, Lost Japan became less of a guidebook and more of a companion. It was something I returned to, especially as I began to make my own discoveries. I thought of Kerr's lament for the "uglification" of Kyoto when I first visited and saw the neon signs and boxy buildings encroaching on its ancient streets. I felt his sense of awe when I wandered into a quiet,

"HE WROTE WITH THE VOICE OF SOMEONE WHO LOVED A PLACE SO MUCH HE COULDN'T BEAR TO SEE IT SLIP AWAY."

lesser-known temple, where time seemed to hang suspended. I even thought of his humorous, sometimes exasperated critiques when I found myself navigating Japan's bureaucracy or watching the latest round of overzealous construction projects spring up in otherwise untouched landscapes.

But what I also came to realise, something Kerr himself hints at but never quite says outright, is that the act of preservation isn't just about saving the past; it's about creating a future. In restoring Chiiori, Kerr wasn't simply holding onto something old; he was building a bridge for the people who would come after him, a way to see that the past and the present don't have to exist in opposition. It's a lesson that I carry with me every time I return to the Iya Valley, every time I see a thread of tradition woven into the fabric of modern Japan.

Lost Japan is a book rooted in loss, but it's also one that overflows with life. Kerr's Japan, his mix of nostalgia, criticism, and awe, helped shape my own relationship with this country. It reminded me to look closer, to pay attention to the details, to see the beauty that so often hides in plain sight. It's a book that made me fall in love with Japan before I even arrived, and one that continues to shape the way I see it, even now. In Kerr's lament, I found my own, and in his hope, I found the possibility of my own small acts of preservation, whether in cleaning the local shrine with the locals or simply in remembering what once was.




- Title: Lost Japan
- Author: Alex Kerr
- Genre: Narrative Nonfiction
- Subject: Cultural and Historical Analysis
- Publisher: Penguin Books
- Original Publication Date: 1993 (Japanese), 1996 (English)
- Summary: Lost Japan explores Japan's fading traditions, natural beauty, and cultural heritage. Drawing on his experience, Alex Kerr reflects on modernisation, environmental destruction, and cultural neglect, lamenting the loss of what makes Japan unique.

"IT'S A BOOK THAT MADE ME FALL IN LOVE WITH JAPAN BEFORE I EVEN ARRIVED."

Image: Reuters

# THE ILLUSION OF DIGITAL OWNERSHIP

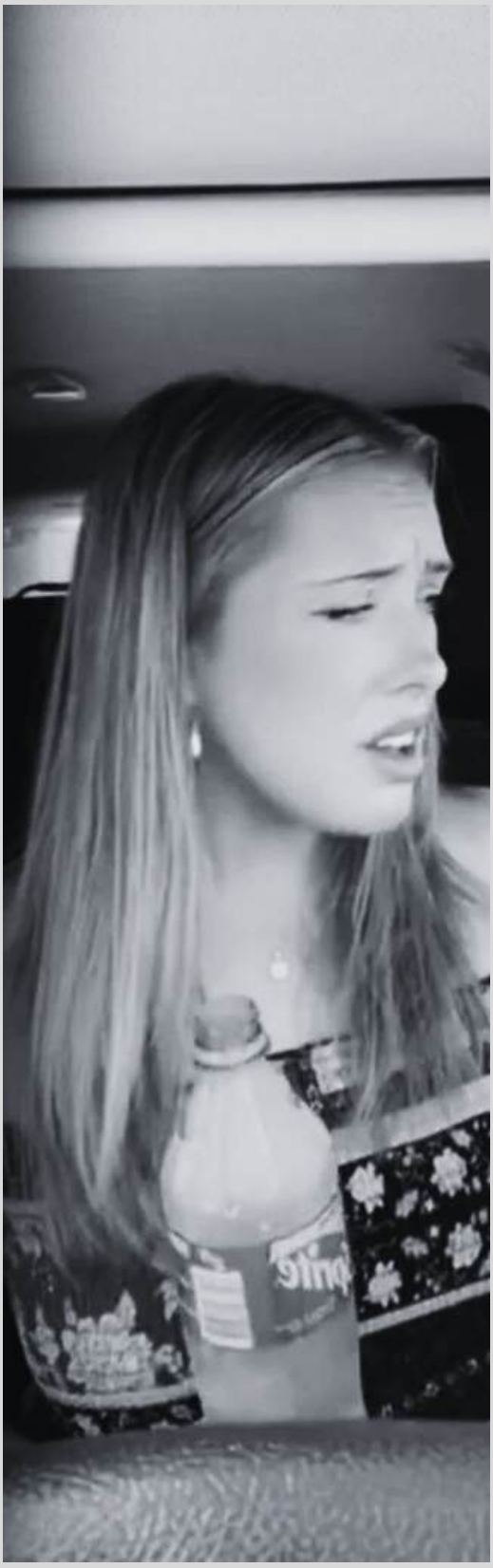
BY PAUL ASHTON

TikTok has always been a reliable source of obsession. For years, it dominated our feeds with its viral dances, chaotic humour, and algorithmic wizardry. But on January 19th, TikTok was banned in the United States, a seismic moment in the app's turbulent saga. What started as a cultural phenomenon has now become the centrepiece of a geopolitical tug-of-war, with the app's future hanging on the possibility of US ownership. If TikTok returns, it will be reincarnated not as a Chinese-owned export but as a wholly American entity, promising to safeguard private data and reclaim control of an ecosystem that has consumed so much of our collective attention.

For all the headlines about privacy and national security, this isn't just a story about geopolitics. It's about dependency. TikTok's ban and its potential revival under US ownership lays bare the fragility of the digital ecosystems we've come to depend on. And this fragility doesn't just apply to the app's creators, who have built entire careers on its algorithm. It extends to brands, the so-called titans of commerce, who have poured millions into mastering TikTok's culture and trends. If TikTok's ban teaches us anything, it's this: you don't own your audience. Not on TikTok, not on Instagram, not on LinkedIn. Nowhere. Every follower, like, or comment isn't yours; it belongs to the platform. TikTok was the landlord; creators and brands were just renters. And, as the US ban demonstrates, you can get kicked out at any time.

TikTok's meteoric rise was as much a cultural juggernaut as a technological one. Powered by an algorithm that seemed to read minds, it turned unknown creators into stars overnight and gave brands a way to speak directly to audiences with unprecedented intimacy. But what made TikTok

"WHAT STARTED AS A CULTURAL PHENOMENON HAS NOW BECOME THE CENTREPIECE OF A GEOPOLITICAL TUG-OF-WAR."



indispensable for so many also made it dangerous. Like all social media platforms, TikTok thrives on data, every tap, swipe, and second spent watching is recorded to refine its addictive feed. For the United States, the concern was clear: TikTok's treasure trove of behavioural data could be accessed by the Chinese government through its Beijing-based parent company, ByteDance. The US ban was framed as a move to safeguard national security, but it also exposed the risks inherent in dependency on any platform, not just TikTok.

Interestingly, Japan has taken a notably different approach to this question of dependency and bans. While the US acted decisively to block TikTok, Japan has historically been reluctant to ban platforms outright, even in the face of significant public or governmental pressure. This caution stems partly from its style of faction-based political governance but also from its reliance on technology to fuel economic and cultural growth. In a hyper-connected society where platforms are deeply embedded in daily life, bans are seen as a last resort.

In fact, Japan's history of outright platform bans is surprisingly sparse. One of the rare instances was the government's decision in 2018 to block certain foreign pirated content sites, such as Mangamura, a site notorious for hosting unauthorised scans of manga. Even this move was controversial, requiring significant strong legal justification and intense public debate before proceeding. And yet, it was as much about protecting domestic creators as it was about any geopolitical or security threat. Unlike the US, which framed its TikTok ban in the language of national security, Japan's response to online platforms has often been about fostering

"IN A HYPER-CONNECTED SOCIETY WHERE PLATFORMS ARE DEEPLY EMBEDDED IN DAILY LIFE, BANS ARE SEEN AS A LAST RESORT."

trust and collaboration rather than engaging in outright exclusion.

TikTok in Japan has been allowed to operate in Japan with relatively little interference when compared to the US and the EU. ByteDance even established data centres in Japan to reassure lawmakers and users alike. The app remains wildly popular among Japanese users, weaving itself into the fabric of the country's pop culture. While the US banned TikTok in a sweeping move, Japan's government has been content to keep the app under a watchful eye, balancing concerns over data privacy with the recognition that platforms like TikTok drive enormous cultural and economic value.

Japan's cautious approach to platform bans also highlights an uncomfortable reality about the platforms themselves: they thrive on dependency. TikTok, like many others, has built its success on making creators and brands feel like they can't survive without it. It sells the dream of empowerment, promising creators an audience and brands a direct line to consumers, all while keeping the real power firmly in its own hands. But as TikTok's saga unfolds, the truth becomes undeniable: the only way to break free from this cycle of dependency is through ownership.


Creators who bolster their presences online with email lists or personal websites don't have to worry about losing their audiences to an algorithm change. Likewise, brands that invest in building communities beyond social media aren't left scrambling when a platform disappears or shifts direction. The TikTok ban isn't just a story about geopolitics or national security; it's a warning shot for anyone who has built their

"THE TRUTH BECOMES UNDENIABLE: THE ONLY WAY TO BREAK FREE FROM THIS CYCLE OF DEPENDENCY IS THROUGH OWNERSHIP."


presence entirely on rented platforms. Platforms should be tools, not the foundation of your strategy.

For brands, this reckoning is particularly harsh. TikTok wasn't just a marketing tool; for many, it was the marketing tool. Its ability to democratise influence, allowing even small brands to go viral with clever, low-budget content, made it revolutionary. But those same brands are now realising their success wasn't tied to the strength of their products or their connection to consumers, it was tied to the whims of a platform they never truly understood.

Creators, too, are grappling with what this means for their futures. TikTok promised empowerment, selling them the idea that they could build their empires, monetise their creativity, and connect directly with audiences. But that promise was built on quicksand. Creators were never in control, the algorithm decided who thrived and who didn't. And now, with TikTok's ban in the US, many are realising that their audiences, the ones they spent years cultivating, were never really theirs.

Whether TikTok's ban serves as a cautionary tale or just another chapter in the platform's turbulent history, one truth remains: creators and brands must stop going all in on rented platforms. Japan's example, with its careful balance of regulation over prohibition, offers a quiet reminder that platforms don't have to disappear for us to rethink our dependency on them. Ownership lies not in the hands of algorithms or governments, but in the deliberate choices creators and brands make about where and how they build their digital ecosystems. TikTok's ban is a warning. The question is, who will listen?

"CREATORS WERE NEVER IN CONTROL, THE ALGORITHM DECIDED WHO THRIVED AND WHO DIDN'T."

Image: Lifestyle Guide

# JAPAN BUSINESS ETIQUETTE 101 NETWORKING

BY PAUL ASHTON

Fresh out of university and eager to make my mark in Japan, I quickly realized that networking here was nothing like I had imagined. My initial assumptions, rooted in Western-style business culture, didn't quite fit. There were no elevator pitches or quick handshakes exchanged at fast-paced events. Instead, I found myself navigating a world where relationships were cultivated quietly, over time, and where the unspoken held as much weight as the spoken.

Networking in Japan wasn't just about meeting people; it was about understanding the culture, reading between the lines, and building trust step by step. At first, it felt like decoding a complex and unfamiliar system, but as I immersed myself in the nuances, I came to appreciate its depth and value. Networking here is less about quick wins and more about creating connections that endure, an art form that balances tradition with growing modern influences.

The Japanese approach to networking is deeply rooted in cultural values like wa (harmony), omoiyari (empathy), and shinyou (trust). Unlike in more transactional networking cultures, where success is often measured by the number of contacts gained or deals closed, in Japan, the quality of relationships takes precedence. Networking here often blends social and professional elements, resulting in relationships that are both meaningful and enduring.

"NETWORKING IN JAPAN WASN'T JUST ABOUT MEETING PEOPLE; IT WAS ABOUT UNDERSTANDING THE CULTURE, READING BETWEEN THE LINES, AND BUILDING TRUST."

A cornerstone of traditional Japanese networking is the nomikai, or after-work drinking session. These gatherings provide an opportunity to break down formal barriers and bond on a personal level. While the nomikai is informal in tone, it still follows unspoken rules: pouring drinks for others before refilling your own, participating in group toasts, and maintaining discretion about what's shared during these moments of camaraderie.

Another essential ritual is the exchange of business cards (meishi). This isn't just a formality, it's a ritual that demonstrates respect. Presenting your card with both hands, carefully reading the card you receive, and storing it properly (not in your pocket!) are small actions that carry significant weight.

That said though, networking in Japan is evolving, and the differences between generations are stark.

Traditionalists (Boomers and Older Gen X) rely on structured, hierarchical networking. The nomikai remains essential for building trust, and relationships often develop within formal settings like company-sponsored events or industry associations. This group places a strong emphasis on patience and respect for seniority.

Millennials (Younger Gen X and Gen Y) blend traditional values with modern practices. While they still participate in nomikai and value face-to-face interaction, they're more likely to use digital tools like LinkedIn or LINE to maintain connections. They also tend to

"WHILE THE NOMIKAI IS INFORMAL IN TONE, IT STILL FOLLOWS UNSPOKEN RULE."

favor collaborative, cross-industry networking opportunities and value quicker, mutually beneficial exchanges.

Digital Natives (Gen Z) are reshaping networking entirely. With a preference for digital-first platforms like LinkedIn, Instagram, and Twitter, they prioritize efficiency and authenticity. Virtual meetups, online communities, and social media have become key networking tools for this generation, though they often navigate a delicate balance between these modern methods and traditional expectations when interacting with older generations.

Japan's networking culture is also adapting to accommodate changing lifestyles and professional demands.

One growing trend is event networking centered around common interests. These events focus on topics like marketing, sustainability, or tech, where participants come together to share ideas and collaborate. Typically held on weekday evenings, they provide a relaxed yet professional setting for building meaningful connections.

For those who can't attend evening events, daytime networking formats are becoming increasingly popular. In Tokyo, creative approaches like NetWalking, where professionals network while walking through parks or scenic areas, and Father and Child events, designed for working parents, are gaining traction. These inclusive formats cater to individuals with non-traditional schedules, opening up new opportunities to build relationships outside of the conventional mold.

"ONE GROWING TREND IS EVENT NETWORKING CENTERED AROUND COMMON INTERESTS."

Despite these changes, the foundational principles of networking in Japan remain steadfast. Relationships are built over time, trust is earned through consistency, and reciprocity is key. Whether you're connecting with a traditionalist or a digital native, showing gratitude and returning favours is essential.

Adapting to Japan's networking culture requires patience and cultural awareness. For foreign professionals, learning even small gestures, like how to exchange meishi properly or when to say "yoroshiku onegaishimasu", can make a significant difference. And while the pace may feel slow compared to other cultures, the depth and strength of the relationships you build are well worth the effort.

Networking in Japan is as much an art as it is a skill. It blends tradition with modern innovation, balancing the values of respect, harmony, and trust with the realities of an ever-changing professional landscape. Whether you're pouring drinks at a nomikai, exchanging ideas at a marketing event, or walking through Yoyogi Park during a NetWalking session, the core of Japanese networking remains the same: it's about building meaningful, lasting connections that go beyond the surface.

For those willing to invest the time and effort, networking in Japan is not just a path to professional success but a journey of personal growth and cultural discovery.

"ADAPTING TO JAPAN'S NETWORKING CULTURE REQUIRES PATIENCE AND CULTURAL AWARENESS."

Kintaikyo Bridge, Iwakuni

# BUSINESS JAPANESE FOR PEOPLE IN A RUSH

BY PAUL ASHTON

Phrase:
では、手短に申し上げます。
(Dewa, temijika ni mooshiagemasu)

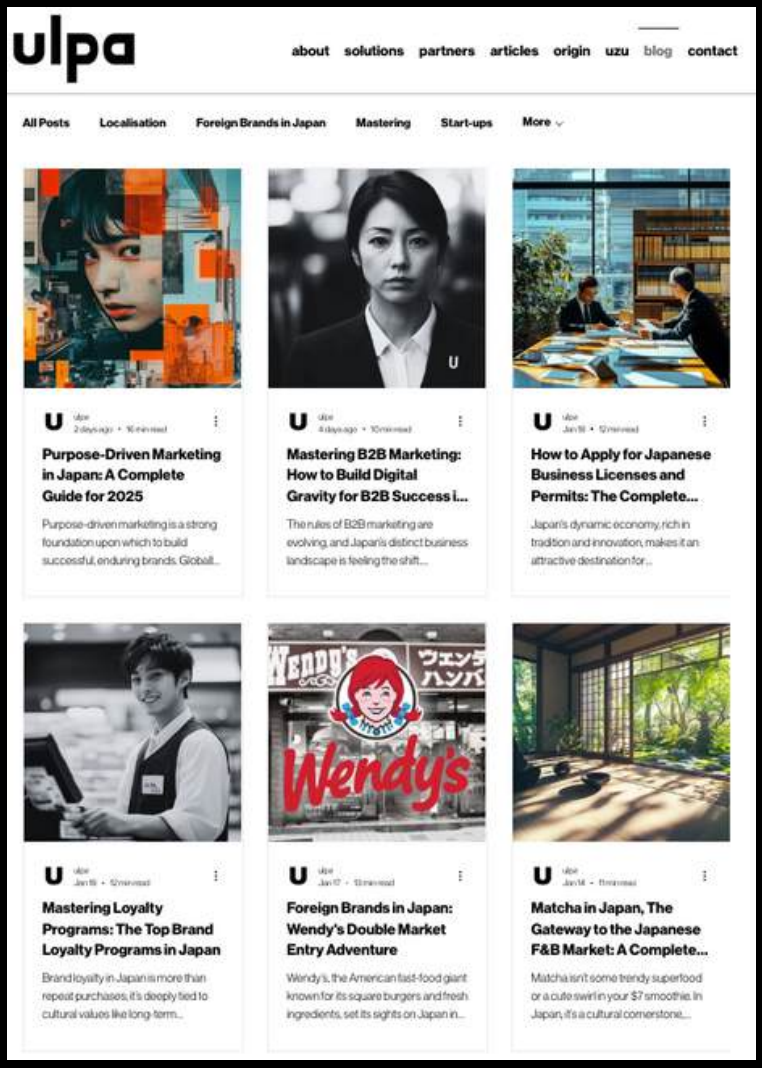
Meaning:
The phrase "では、手短に申し上げます。" translates to "OK, I'll be brief." The word 「手短」(temijika) indicates brevity, signaling that you will keep your explanation or remarks concise and to the point. This polite expression is often used in formal or professional settings when you need to convey key information succinctly. The addition of 「申し上げます」(mooshiagemasu) elevates the politeness, making it appropriate for hierarchical or formal conversations.

Usage in Context:
In Japanese professional communication, efficiency and respect for others' time are highly valued. This phrase is a way to demonstrate awareness of the listener's schedule or attention span, particularly in meetings or presentations. By saying "では、手短に申し上げます," you assure the audience that your remarks will be concise, creating an impression of professionalism and consideration.

Example:
Context: You are about to give a brief update during a team meeting with senior management.
Phrase:
では、手短に申し上げます。
Translation:
"OK, I'll be brief."

Cultural Note:
In Japanese culture, being concise and to the point is often appreciated, especially in formal or hierarchical settings. Using this phrase signals respect for your audience's time while also ensuring that your message is clearly understood. It is especially helpful when speaking to busy executives or in situations where multiple speakers need to share updates. Employing phrases like this demonstrates your understanding of Japanese business etiquette, fostering better communication and rapport.

**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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