

# An EAA Interview with *Lauren McKee*



## Author of *Japanese Government and Politics* An AAS Key Issues in Asian Studies Publication

*Lauren McKee is Associate Professor of Political Science and Asian Studies at Berea College. She first joined the faculty of Berea College in 2014 as an ASIANetwork-Luce Foundation postdoctoral teaching fellow after receiving a PhD in International Studies from Old Dominion University. Dr. McKee regularly works with the National Consortium for Teaching about Asia (NCTA) and has been published in Education about Asia. She enjoys teaching classes on comparative and East Asian politics and has taken students on study trips to Japan and China. Dr. McKee recently joined the US-Japan Network for the Future, an initiative dedicated to promoting bilateral policymaking and US-Japan understanding, which is sponsored by the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Foundation and the Japan Center for Global Partnerships.*

*In the following interview, McKee discusses her recently published Key Issues in Asian Studies volume, Japanese Government and Politics. Key Issues in Asian Studies books are designed for use in undergraduate humanities and social science courses, as well as by advanced high-school students and teachers, and will appeal to anyone with an interest in Asia. Books in the series complement the AAS teaching journal, Education About Asia, and serve as vital educational materials that are both accessible and affordable for classroom use. Key Issues books tackle broad subjects or major cultural and historical themes in an introductory but compelling, jargon-free style appropriate for survey courses, written to encourage classroom debate and discussion.*

**Lucien Ellington:** Lauren, please share with readers how you became interested in Japan in general and specifically, in Japanese politics and government?

**Lauren McKee:** It's certainly not a straight-forward story! As an undergraduate English major at the University of Southern Mississippi, I was set to go to graduate school to study Irish literature. On a whim, my final semester as an undergraduate, I took a class on the Vietnam War and then had the chance to study abroad in Vietnam. Luckily, there were scholars who specialized in Vietnam War literature and Asian American literature, so I was able to easily change the focus of my studies. I wanted to learn more about the United States' involvement in East Asia, the political causes and consequences, and how these two places have shaped each other over the years. This naturally led me to learn more about Japan and, as an instructor at the University of New Orleans, I had the opportunity to participate in the first year of an exchange between UNO and Doshisha University in Kyoto. This allowed me to travel to Japan for the first time, and, as when I visited Vietnam, another turn was added to my path. I chose to pursue a Ph.D. in International Studies and eventually wrote about nuclear energy policy in the wake of Japan's 3/11 triple disaster as a dissertation topic.

I took that interest in East Asia to the Asian Studies and Political Science departments at Berea College, which I joined in 2014. The past few years, I've seen increasing numbers of students taking courses on domestic and international politics. There are likely many factors to explain this phenomenon, but one is certainly a rising concern among young people about the current state of democracy in the US and about global challenges like climate change. Many of them come to international politics courses looking for solutions or for alternatives to what they view as the problems their generation will need to face. Studying political systems comparatively offers just that—a chance to think systematically about why and how our system operates the way that it does and compare that to systems in other places. As one of the first nonwestern democracies, an “uncommon” democracy, some like to say, Japan offers a fascinating case study to share with students and to learn more about myself.

So, mine has been a bit of a long and winding academic road, but those are often the most enjoyable to travel.

**Lucien:** Why do you think it is particularly important that undergraduate and secondary school instructors most of who are aren't Japan specialists, and especially undergraduate and honors high school level students with perhaps some knowledge of Japan, but limited or no understanding of Japanese politics, learn about Japan's government and political system?

**Lauren:** One way we can study Japan is as a harbinger state, or a state that experiences challenges before other states in the international system.<sup>1</sup> Economists have long studied Japan's periods of economic growth and stagnation but there are many other noteworthy examples of domestic and foreign policy challenges Japan had to face before other countries. Japan is not unusual for having low fertility rates among countries in East Asia; however, Japan's fertility rates fell below replacement levels in the early 1970s, much earlier than other countries.<sup>2</sup> Since then, Japan's government has actually had some successes in reversing this trend, contrary to the popular narrative, by instituting and expanding policies like parental leave benefits. Unfortunately, the economic uncertainty and increased costs of living from the COVID-19 pandemic has all but erased these gains, but none of these are problems unique to Japan.

Japan also faces many geopolitical and foreign policy challenges. As a country without many naturally occurring natural resources like oil, coal, or gas, Japan has had to piece together an energy resource portfolio from imports and domestic production while also managing consumption and waste, developing in the process one of the most complex and successful recycling programs in the world. This dependence on imports made news when Japan was unable to join select energy sanctions on Russia following its invasion of Ukraine. Geopolitically, Japan often finds itself caught between an increasingly powerful China and its alliance partner the United States. How Japan's government manages these relationships—in terms of security and its economic partnerships—will be a lesson for many other countries in the region and in the world. By better understanding how Japan responds and adjusts to these and many other challenges, other countries around the world can possibly better prepare their own responses in the future.

Finally, I think students who are interested in Japan often initially become so because of anime or manga, which, as cultural products, are important soft

power tools. Both are art forms, and art is inherently political. Of course, we have to expand our understanding of what is “political,” and I define politics in the KIAS volume as the struggle for decision-making power. It’s not just elections and politicians, it’s people deciding how much power the government should have over their lives, the struggle for civil and political rights within an institution or system, and the challenge of understanding how your individual interests fit into the larger interests of the group. At their core, many manga and anime tackle the same themes, and understanding politics means being able to better understand the world and how to navigate it.

**Lucien:** *Since most students who read or, are assigned KIAS volumes are Americans, please share your thoughts with readers on how learning about Japanese government and politics might help young people more specifically understand US government and politics?*

**Lauren:** This question comes up a lot—why Japan? In fact, it’s the title to the introduction to this KIAS volume. My first thought is always, “why *not* Japan?” Learning about any other country, culture, and political system is a worthwhile end in and of itself. An American-centric worldview won’t be enough to solve the challenges of the twenty-first century.

But to be more specific, as a parliamentary, unitary system, Japan provides a particularly illustrative contrast to the United States’ presidential, federal system. By understanding the limitations of a prime minister’s powers, for example, you can better grasp the comparatively greater power of a president and the pros and cons of that power. Japan is a multi-party system, but one party—the LDP has really dominated politics since the 1950s. While we complain about the bickering between Democrats and Republicans in the US (and party polarization and the resulting lack of bipartisanship is certainly a problem) we have to also consider the benefits to having two parties share power. Japan is also a useful case to observe the effects of culture on democratic practices, which I explore a little in Chapter 5 on Civil Society and Political Participation.

Amidst the differences, we can also find points of similarity. Japan is known for the power of its political factions that divide the biggest parties, though those factions are somewhat less powerful now than in the past. We see the same even in the two US political parties, like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and the “squad” in the democratic party or the Tea Party in the Republican Party. A comparative study can help us better understand the kinds of change these factions might be able to create to the parties themselves, both long and short term.

Another similarity I’ve noticed is that young people in both the US and Japan have become somewhat disillusioned with the idea that traditional politics represents their interests. Let’s face it—many politicians in both countries are not young. The average age of the Japanese Diet is 56 and, in the US Congress, the average is even older at 61.<sup>3</sup> Young people don’t see themselves represented in most political conversations, which leads them to seek out alternative routes for political empowerment. We look at low voter turnout among young people and say they aren’t political, but that may not be the case. Instead, we have to look for how young people in both countries are acting outside the system to create change.

In terms of foreign policy, it would be difficult to understand US international decision-making without understanding its most enduring alliance

and relationship with Japan. We can only anticipate the US-Japan relationship to deepen as Japan pursues a more robust defense and security strategy in the coming years.

**Lucien:** *Since it is imperative that pedagogical scholarship projects such as KIAS volumes have much more breadth than traditional scholarship, authors whose proposals are accepted, invariably learn new content from often, a variety of academic disciplines, and even from related specialties in their own fields where they have limited knowledge. Can you share a couple of examples of new content you learned in doing the research for your volume, that particularly attracted your interest?*

**Lauren:** My original proposal was for a volume just on US-Japan relations since that’s what I know best but you’ll see that Japan’s foreign policy becomes just one chapter in the finished book. So every chapter was an opportunity for deeper learning as I tried to consistently tie Japan into a bigger, comparative perspective. I probably spent most of my research time reading more about history, especially pre-Meiji Era political developments. I always tell my students that we can’t understand today without understanding yesterday and the day before, which prompts them to joke that most of my in-class answers require us to go back to the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648. Specifically, I was challenged to think more about the development of the state-centric Westphalian system as a Western construct and how countries in East Asia, Japan included, have or have not adapted to that system. We find over and over that the current rules and norms

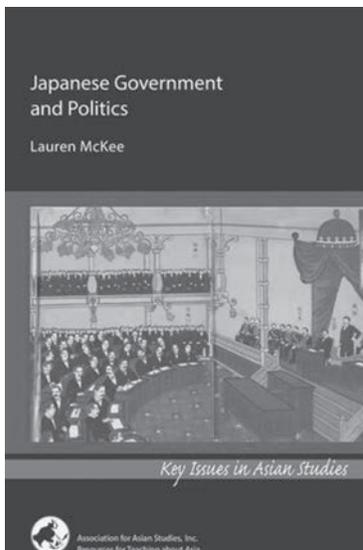
of the international system were not made by most countries that still have to figure out how to survive under them. In this way, politics can also be understood as the study of how to adopt and manipulate the rules to your advantage.

**Lucien:** *Currently, in your opinion, what do most Japanese citizens consider one or two of the nations most serious domestic challenges? Your opinion is also welcome regarding Japanese citizens’ perceptions of significant foreign policy challenges faced by the nation.*

**Lauren:** I think most Japanese people would respond with the problems that are most immediate to them—inflation, increasing costs of living, economic stagnation, and gender inequity. Those are the things people feel on a day-to-day basis and I imagine the responses would be similar in many countries.

Many people would also likely identify depopulation and aging as the most significant issue because of the related challenges this phenomenon creates. An older population can put a strain on government resources and social spending. Economically, declining birth rates has meant a more risk averse business atmosphere and less innovation and production. Fewer people to participate in the work force means difficult conversations about immigration and gender equity. Even concerns about defense and national security can be tied to depopulation.<sup>4</sup> While governmental policies have made some advances in increasing birth rates and female labor force participation, the pandemic has erased many of those gains. And there is a limit to what governmental policy can do—solutions will require changes in people’s thinking about traditional, gendered roles in child rearing and responsibilities for household duties if birth rates are to increase.

Within the government, the domination of the LDP (and its long-time coalition partner, Komeito) and the inability of opposition parties to form any kind of cohesive challenge to the LDP is also problematic. Electoral reforms in



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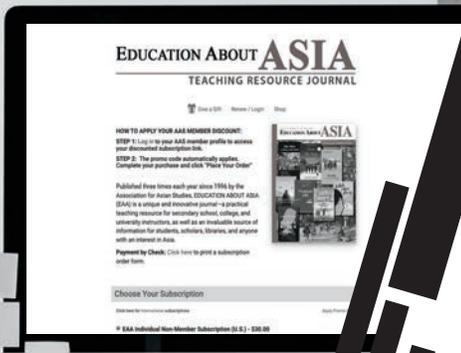
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the 1990s sought, at least in part, to move Japan toward a two-party system, yet that kind of power-sharing arrangement has not wholly emerged. The absence of any real challenge to the LDP coalition has led to increases in government corruption and overall diminished policy-making capacity. Bipartisanship and parliamentary debates become political theatre instead of real opportunities to craft effective policy. I'm not sure I see this changing anytime soon.

I think people are more divided on foreign policy challenges. The alliance with the US has always been a polarizing topic. Some see the alliance as imperative to Japan's security while others think the relationship exploits Japan to the US's favor. What's clear is that in a neighborhood with North Korea and China next door, Japan has a careful balancing act to perform. At the same time, Japan is entirely capable of pursuing its own foreign policy objectives that have little to do with the US, by expanding trade in countries in Africa and the Middle East, for example.

**Lucien:** *Since you recently successfully finished your volume, what specific advice might you offer to a prospective author who is contemplating a possible KIAS?*

**Lauren:** If you are considering a proposal, think broadly. As academics, we often find our niche and stick to it, but writing these books requires a breadth of knowledge that will expand those comfort zones. So you have to write about more content but do it in fewer pages because the volumes also have to be relatively short. Finding that balance and, in the process, learning the skill of descriptive brevity was a new challenge for me, but I emerged a better thinker and writer on the other side. I am forever thankful for your patience and editing skills in this regard.

**Lucien:** *Thank you! I am particularly impressed that to date, Berea College has the unique distinction of publishing a second KIAS volume shortly after publishing a second edition of a prior KIAS volume. No other college or university has ever had two faculty members publishing a KIAS. I don't think this is an accident. What are your thoughts about this phenomenon?*

**Lauren:** I think the answer has both institutional and practical explanations. In practical terms, Jeff and I both regularly teach courses abroad in Japan, sometimes on the same Kentucky Institute for International Studies (KIIS) program. If you've ever taught on a study trip, you know you need teaching materials that are physically light and easy to pack, affordable, and concise. I wrote this book with at least one eye to using it on future study abroad programs for these exact reasons, as I know Jeff also uses his book when we take students to Japan.

Institutionally, Berea College prides itself on high-quality teaching, a mission that often attracts people who are interested in teaching in the first place. From there, the college provides many opportunities for professional development, essentially "putting money where its mouth is," for both teaching and research support. I've benefitted from these many opportunities that helped me finish this volume. Berea also works to mentor and retain junior faculty, and I have found excellent mentors and advocates in the Asian Studies and Political Science departments, one of whom is Jeff Richey, the author of the KIAS volume *Confucius in East Asia*. I don't think I can overstate how important that mentoring—and friendship—has been in my development as a scholar and teacher. This vibrant Asian studies community in rural Kentucky is the result of the hard work and tenacity of many individuals and is now paying off in quality, student-centered scholarship like the KIAS volumes.

**Lucien:** *Thank you for the interview, Lauren!* ♦

NOTES

1. The most recent essay is probably Philip Y. Lippsey's "Japan: the Harbinger State." from his personal website at <https://tinyurl.com/ms5nny6x>.
2. Hilary J. Holbrow has an insightful essay on this topic for *Nikkei Asia*: <https://tinyurl.com/yhfem2d8>.
3. 2023 data according to IPU Parline: <https://tinyurl.com/yymdn56mx>.
4. See Tom Phuong Le, *Japan's Aging Peace* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).