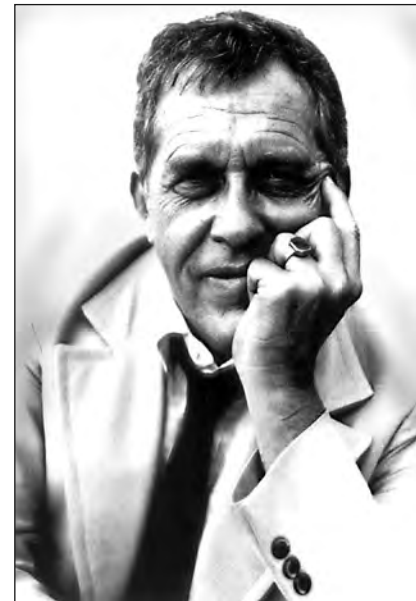


An EAA Interview with Donald Richie

DIALOGUE ON JAPAN *Conversations With Donald Richie*

Interview by Peter Grilli

Donald Richie has long been celebrated as one of the world's most insightful observers of Japan. He first arrived in Japan as a military serviceman in 1947, and has lived in Tokyo for most of the sixty years since. For that entire period he has kept notes and journals of everything he saw and experienced, and his observations have been given public form in numerous books, essays, films, and commentaries on Japan. Richie first came to international attention for his writing about Japanese films: he co-authored the first major work on the history of Japanese cinema, and he wrote major biographies of the great Japanese directors Akira Kurosawa and Yasujiro Ozu. He has written important books on particular Japanese films and on genres of Japanese film. Richie has also written books and essays on nearly every other aspect of Japanese life and society. His books on Japanese arts and culture are essential reading for anyone interested in Japan, and his travel journal *The Inland Sea* has been acclaimed as a classic of world travel literature.



Peter Grilli also arrived in Japan in 1947 as a child of five, and has lived in Japan for nearly twenty-five years. He knew Donald Richie first as a close family friend, later as a role model and mentor, as a teacher, and as a colleague. Grilli has been active in many aspects of Japan-US cultural exchange as a writer, teacher, filmmaker, and producer of Japanese performing-arts events. He is currently President of the Japan Society of Boston. The following interview was conducted in October 2006.

Peter Grilli: *Donald, you're often introduced as the person who has lived in Japan longer than practically anyone else, the one who has seen everything, observed it all, and knows it better than anyone. And in so many ways, that's true. You've lived in Japan since 1947—not absolutely continuously, but nearly—and you've seen so much change in Japan over those sixty years. In your writing, you sometimes seem nostalgic about those early days, but you also seem eternally youthful and eager for the next new experience. Do you find things in Japan today that seem better than they were before? What things have improved, and made life better? And what are your regrets? What do you think has been lost?*

Donald Richie: All things that seem better to me are public things. The things I regret, the things that have been lost, turn out to be private things. What do I mean by “public things”? Well, the physical health of the Japanese people, for example, their longevity, their literacy, their ownership of property, their ability to control their lives to some degree. In such things there is tremendous improvement over the way it used to be. Their political freedom is totally different than before the war, and the physical comforts of life are certainly much, much better than they were in 1947.

And what do I regret about the passing of the old? That's less outward, less evident, harder to see sometimes. It has more to do with attitudes than with appearances. Let me give you an example: Soon

after I first arrived in Japan, I was walking down a street one day and watched some workmen building a wall. It was a wall surrounding a house, intended to give some privacy to the house and garden. There was a large tree with a branch sticking out into the street, and instead of cutting off the branch, they fashioned a hole in the wall to allow the branch to extend through the wall. This impressed me very much. Why? To me, it indicated a way of living that I had never seen in America. It showed a respect for Nature, an understanding of man's place in Nature, a kind of symbiosis of man and Nature.

The sight of man living in such harmony with his natural surroundings was absolutely stunning to me, because I came from a land where Nature was something to be subdued. In America, you conquered land, you cultivated it, you dominated it. The idea of living peacefully within Nature—not standing triumphantly on top of Nature—was something I admired very much. And still do.

But I don't run across this attitude very much in Japan these days. Nowadays, you find that it's expedient to tear down an old house and build a new one because that's a lot cheaper than preserving it. Preservation in Japan costs much more than destruction. And so, the old temple goes down—even though the priest might prefer to keep it—simply because he doesn't have the funds to preserve it. This kind of attitude has taken the place of a sensibility that I once admired very much in Japan. I regret that very much.

For a long time, Japan worried about whether it was becoming “too Western” or “too modern”; whether it was too one thing or another, or not enough of either. And they sort of placed “modern” and “Japanese” in opposition to one another. But now they invent so much of the stuff that it can hardly be called “Western” any more!

I regret this loss of a kind of “innocence of use.” Formerly, people didn’t seem to *use* Nature as they do today. Instead, they accommodated themselves to it well. But nowadays they have a different attitude, and they have so many machines to help them dominate Nature.

Another thing I regret is the proliferation of techniques of communication. People now look into the palms of their hands, at strange little instruments that they’re holding, rather than into each other’s eyes. They are forever being distracted by Walkmen or I-pods or cute animated images on portable phones or video machines. They are constantly in a state of being distracted. Zen says that multi-tasking, or doing many things at once, is really the way of not doing anything. When you are intent on doing something, you must do that one thing and that alone.

But nowadays in Japan everybody is multi-tasking all over the place! They are hurrying along walking at the same time that they’re talking at the same time that they’re listening at the same time that they’re reading, which means that actually they are really doing none of those things. Concentration has been lost, there’s no focus. And this I regret.

Peter Grilli: *Does that seem somehow a more “Western” form of behavior, and therefore less “Japanese?” Or has it become just as Japanese to act that way?*

Donald Richie: It’s just as Japanese. . . . But I’ve stopped thinking in terms of “East” and “West.” That’s no longer a dichotomy that makes much sense.

What I do think in terms of, though, is *modernism*. They’re more contemporary. This behavior is certainly more contemporary. For a long time, Japan worried about whether it was becoming “too Western” or “too modern”; whether it was too one thing or another, or not enough of either. And they sort of placed “modern” and “Japanese” in opposition to one another. But now they invent so much of the stuff that it can hardly be called “Western” any more!

Peter Grilli: *You mean the technology? The instruments of communication? The cell phones and Walkmen?*

Donald Richie: Yes, exactly. Those things are all invented (or at least perfected) in Japan. So I think that the constant use of such instruments actually has to do with being contemporary or futuristic. I myself just don’t feel very much in touch with all those things. And that makes me an old fogey, I guess.

Peter Grilli: *Let’s get back to that wall for a minute: the one with the hole cut out to accommodate the branches of a tree. You know our mutual friend, Alex Kerr*, has written at great length about how Japan is being paved over, turned into one vast expanse of concrete. Do you agree with that view? Do you think that fits in with what you were saying about the changing relationship with Nature?*

(*Alex Kerr is author of the books *Lost Japan* and *Dogs and Demons: Tales from the Dark Side of Modern Japan*.)

Donald Richie: Yes, I think so. Alex and I have a different take on

things, but I do think he’s right on target when he criticizes all the pork-barrel politics that lead to the wastefulness of building roads that don’t go anywhere, bridges that no one uses, and the general asphaltting of the entire country. Alex remembers when he came in the 1970s and saw how natural Japan looked. Of course, when I came in 1947, Japan was The Garden of Eden! I’d never seen a more beautiful country than Japan! And now—both Alex and I agree on this—it has become one of the ugliest.

However, there is a difference between us. Alex feels so badly about this change that he leaves Japan. But I stay. He feels it more emotionally, perhaps, or maybe more deeply than I do. And if he feels that way, then he’s right to leave, I guess. But me? I’m ready to make a number of accommodations. I live in the center of Tokyo, in an area which is, frankly, extremely old fashioned. I’ve sort of fashioned my old Tokyo, which doesn’t really exist anywhere else. The way I live now is still very much the way I lived when I first came to Tokyo. You know. You’ve seen my apartment and how I live. The frugalities that I practice, without much thinking about them—lack of space, lack of things, not accumulating anything. This is very 1947 of me. That’s the way I lived then, too.

Peter Grilli: *But then you lived in a tiny, wooden Japanese-style house, and you had grass and trees and a little garden right outside your window. And now you live on the 8th floor of a high-rise concrete building.*

Donald Richie: And I have the entire Ueno Park as my garden! It hangs there like a vast green mandala outside my window.

Peter Grilli: *So that’s your garden?*

Donald Richie: Yes. That’s my garden. All of Shinobazu Pond and Ueno Park!

Peter Grilli: *In the Japanese process of becoming “modern” and in somehow changing in its perceptions of Nature, do you see the Tokyo Olympics of 1964 as a sort of milestone?*

Donald Richie: Yes, a major watershed. There have been many such watersheds. 1951 was another such watershed: at the point when the Occupation period finally and officially ended, and everybody had a sort of “land-rush mentality,” putting up jerrybuilt structures symbolizing the beginning of “The New Japan.”

But the big thing, the big turning point that really affected Japan on every level was the 1964 Olympics. It symbolized the restructuring of Japan; it meant new subways, new highways, new high-rise skyscrapers. Everyone was swept up in this onrush of change. It meant foreigners pouring into the country in great numbers for the first time. It meant that the regard of the world—the spotlight of the world—was turning onto little Japan. And the entire country felt it had to put its best foot forward. It also meant that Japan was joining society again—world society, the international community—after having been an outcast for so long. It meant all of these things, and this spirit affected all levels of Japanese society.

I remember the cleanup that started even before the Olympics. We used to go down to Shinjuku and there would always be shady men standing on the corners selling dirty postcards, among other things. They were all taken away before the Olympics. Everything was cleaned up and made spic-and-span. It was the “new Japanese Victorian Age.” It was a clean new world. If it reached down to that level, you can just imagine what it was like on all other levels.

Everything was celebratory, and everyone became *objective about themselves*. It was as though the Japanese people were seeing themselves from a foreign point of view.

Before the Olympics, there really weren't many *Nihonjin-ron*,* for example. But the Olympics seemed to be the turning point that make Japan seem somehow unique in the eyes of her own people. You know, stories began to appear in the press that Japanese had longer intestines than anyone else, that they had different brain sizes, and so on—all those signs of uniqueness that were insisted upon in so many *Nihonjin-ron* books and essays.

*(ed: essays on Japanese uniqueness)

Peter Grilli: *But weren't those signs of Japanese uniqueness insisted on for very strategic purposes? To help set up certain kinds of trade barriers that would prevent the importation of various products from abroad? You remember: European skis could not be used on Japanese slopes because Japanese snow was supposed to be different from any other kind of snow. And American apples or rice couldn't be imported because Japanese intestines were said to be different and required Japanese apples or rice.*

Donald Richie: You're right. That was the use that such attitudes were put to—but those attitudes had to be there beforehand in order to be put to use. And they *were* there before.

I see them as the product of that “new objectivity” that the Japanese developed about themselves around the time of the Olympics. At any rate, I don't remember any *Nihonjin-ron* before then.

Peter Grilli: *You write often that in the early days, when you first arrived in Japan, the whole notion of “Japanese-ness” and being Japanese was natural and un-self-conscious. You describe it as fish swimming in water, unaware of the water around them. Are you saying that during the 1960s, after the Olympics, a new self-consciousness or self-awareness began to take hold in Japan?*

Donald Richie: Yes, I am saying that. And I'm also hinting that it turned out that way because it was expedient to do so. It was to their advantage.

Peter Grilli: *But this expedience thing—this pragmatism of the Japanese—isn't that really something very old? Isn't that an ancient social dynamic in Japan?*

Donald Richie: Yes, that's true. Japan is an extraordinarily pragmatic land. But, there *is* a difference. This open use of “Japanese uniqueness” in *Nihonjin-ron* became more explicit and more overt. There has always been a part of Japan that compared itself to China and drew inspiration from China. Historically, Japanese were always measuring themselves against China and either finding themselves wanting or sometimes considering themselves superior. But I don't believe there was ever such widespread economic use of such attitudes until after the Olympics.

Peter Grilli: *What do you mean by “Nihonjin-ron?”*

Donald Richie: *Nihonjin-ron* are treatises based on the premise that Japan is unique and the Japanese people are unlike anyone else in the world. A central theme is the separateness of Japan. How Japan is different from any other country or any other society. Japan the Exceptional. You hear the word “unique” a lot in Japan, even now.

It's a kind of exclusivity. It means that Japan is not necessarily subject to the same rules that everyone else must live by. And there are many, many books that address this notion. They are *Nihonjin-ron*.

Many Japanese are enthusiastic about such ideas and such books. Sometimes, the most extreme expressions of Japanese uniqueness were written by outside observers, and the Japanese are especially delighted by this, as anyone might be.

Nowadays, *Nihonjin-ron* have fallen somewhat out of fashion. Foreign observers have stopped writing such books and even the Japanese have stopped producing so many of them. So, little by little, social theorists and commentators are becoming less able to punch those buttons of “uniqueness” and “exclusivity” as readily as they once did.

Peter Grilli: *You came to know many Japanese writers and artists during the years following World War II. Could you speak a bit about their response to Japan's surrender and to the democratic reforms of the American Occupation? After the decade-and-a-half of wartime repressiveness by their own militarist government, did they find some relief in the ideals of the postwar period?*

Donald Richie: Well, at first the democratic ideals that we were pushing at the beginning of the Occupation brought great optimism and a wave of hope. Democracy was seen as a shining new model of freedom and expressiveness. The people who took to this, which was the majority of the people I knew, embraced these ideals quite honestly and sincerely—not simply to curry favor with the Americans. Even though the country was struggling out of the wartime ashes, you saw hope everywhere. You saw happiness, and you saw smiling faces as they really began constructing their version of what this new democracy was perceived to be. But then, a year or so after I arrived in Japan, the Occupation famously made its “U-Turn” in thinking. Japan was no longer to be a shining model of democracy in Asia and foe of feudalism. Instead, the Occupation's policy changed and Japan was to be turned into America's ally in the war against communism. Japan was called a “floating battleship for America.” This shift confused many of us in the Occupation, and it left the Japanese terribly bewildered and discombobulated. The lasting effect was a deep disappointment in America. At one moment America demanded that Japan give up all forms of military attitudes and pay allegiance to peace-loving ideals. And then suddenly, it reversed its principles and began building up its own military might in Asia, turning Japan into a “fortress in the war against communism.” This shift was deeply unsettling to many Japanese.

Peter Grilli: *Among the people whom you were meeting right after the war—writers, artists, intellectuals, and filmmakers—weren't there many who remembered the 1920s, when there had been a great flowering of liberalism and freedom of expression? That spirit had been crushed by the militarism of the 1930s and disappeared during the war, but after the war did they sense the possibility that sort of freedom of expression might be theirs again?*

Donald Richie: Very much so. In fact there was a great “Taishō boom” right after the war. There was a sense that the long war years were an aberration—it was called the “valley of darkness”—now Japan was emerging again into the light. The new era of democracy had restored Japan to safety again, and they could continue along a path of freedom and virtue.

Akira Kurosawa, for example, had been part of the free-thinking, so-called “proletarian artists movement” in the 1920s and early '30s. And he experienced the harsh repressiveness of the military period. His first films after the war were full of a spirit of emancipation and new-found freedom.

If you're thinking only of storylines or plot, then the films certainly do illustrate certain important themes. But if you look deeper, if you look beyond the narrative to how the directors present the story, then you see much more.

Peter Grilli: *Maybe an even more interesting example than Kurosawa would be director Masaki Kobayashi, who—as he often described it himself—was an intense pacifist before the war. He tried to hold out against the war as a sort of conscientious objector, but was drafted and forced to go fight in Manchuria, where he experienced terrible things. And then, after returning to Japan, the films he made in the 1950s and 60s were so fiercely anti-authoritarian in spirit, such powerful condemnations of the abuse of power.*

Donald Richie: I think it was quite natural that after the war was over this new freedom was elaborated and exploited by people who had been through the full horror of the war period, especially artists like Kobayashi or like Kurosawa, who had suffered their loss of freedom so painfully. During those years they had been totally stultified and their idealism had been denied expression. So, when they were finally free to make their films again, they took the whole idea of repression and denounced it passionately in their films. Movies like *Samurai Rebellion* and *Hara Kiri* did just that. Though they did it through the filter of feudalism, since they were samurai films, they were really about contemporary Japanese politics and they rejected the entire ethos of the wartime period. Or else, such directors confronted the war directly in films about incidents that had happened only five or ten years earlier, stories that everyone in the Japanese audience could recognize immediately. Movies like *A Thick Walled Room*, for example, or Kobayashi's trilogy, *The Human Condition*, or his *Youth of Japan: Diary of a Tired Man*. In films like these, he finally had the freedom to come right out and express his revulsion of militarist values. This fierce anti-war sentiment continued for quite a long while, at least ten or fifteen years, and included films like *Fires on the Plain* and *Harp of Burma* by Kon Ichikawa, or *Hoodlum Soldier* by Yasuzo Masumura, and then they began to peter out.

I'm not sure why they petered out, except that they stopped making money. People no longer had that kind of agenda, I guess. They wanted to forget the wartime experience entirely and put it behind themselves forever. And it wasn't simply that anti-war films stopped making money at the box office. There were other kinds of pressure, as well. Even in 1964, when Kobayashi made *Hara Kiri*, there was pressure from producers against making that kind of film. And political pressures, too, were brought against the film studios.

Peter Grilli: *People sometimes talk about film as a “window on society” because they can have a certain didactic value, a kind of anthropological value in studying a society. Do you see Japanese films as particularly useful in that way? Are they reliable tools in studying about Japan?*

Donald Richie: It depends on what you're studying. I mean, if you're studying the Japanese family system as it was, then looking at films by Ozu will help you, of course. Or if you're studying the position of women in Japanese society, then looking at the films of Naruse will certainly help.

But one can “read” their films on various levels. If you're thinking

only of storylines or plot, then the films certainly do illustrate certain important themes. But if you look deeper, if you look beyond the narrative to *how* the directors present the story, then you see much more. In Ozu films, for example, if you look deeper at the structure of the films and the way he frames and presents the stories, then you begin to realize that the family system is itself the culprit that is tearing apart the traditional family. And in Naruse's films, it is society that is the culprit. So, if you look beyond the story into *how* the director is showing you the story, you will find the films much more revealing, on a much deeper level. It's important to “read” a film on various levels.

Indeed, some films work quite well as a sort of textbook for a society. And maybe Japanese films work particularly well at this. One of my earliest discoveries in Japan, when I would sneak into a film about a contemporary subject or a so-called “family film,” was that on my way home, as I looked through the windows of Japanese homes, peering into their dining rooms, to my astonishment I would see exactly the same family doing exactly the same things that I had just seen in the film.

Before this discovery, I had only seen Hollywood movies, where everyone in the pictures had a lot more money than I did and lived much more glamorous lives. You know, Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers in their beautiful tuxedos and ball gowns! America loved to indulge itself in a kind of “wish-fulfillment cinema.” But in Japan I discovered that that was not the only kind of moviemaking, and that came as a great surprise to me. The fact that there could be something like a realist cinema or neo-realist cinema—which is what Japanese cinema was right after the war, mainly for economic reasons—all of this came as an enormous surprise to me. It was a *validation* of film's potential as a truthful reflection of society.

So when you ask about using Japanese films as a “window on society,” they are educational and, to a point, they do work in that way. But they became much more interesting to me when I realized that the window itself was made in Japan, and so was the glass. When you look through this window on society, you also need to think about the window frame and the glass. In other words, the particular ways the films were made—their style.

Peter Grilli: *How about Japanese cinema now? The newer films—the movies made in the 1980s and 90s and right now. Do they work in the same way?*

Donald Richie: Well, one of the tendencies of the film industry as a commercial enterprise, in Japan or anywhere else, is to position itself not on the immediate realities but on the expectations of the viewers. The idea is that if you show viewers what they *want* to see, you supposedly get more viewers and make more money. That takes you away from realistic cinema and pulls you in the direction of escapist cinema or what I call “wish-fulfillment cinema.” That is what has come to reign in Japan, like almost everywhere else. In such movies, either everyone gets a million dollars and is happy or the world explodes or falls apart. It doesn't really make any difference. Nothing succeeds better as entertainment than destruction.

Right now, what we're getting in Japan is a lot of "young love" movies—*seishun-mono*. They tend to be psychological dramas about disturbed youngsters. But most of them have happy endings: the heroine gets well, or else she dies beautifully, and it really doesn't make any difference. It's a happy ending either way.

Peter Grilli: *Is it still a happy ending if she dies?*

Donald Richie: Yes, so long as she dies beautifully. Happy ending either way: whether she gets well or dies beautifully. Plus, there's a lot of violence. That's always very popular with young audiences.

One of the tragedies of Japanese cinema, though, is that the audience just doesn't go to Japanese movies any more. Everybody goes to see American movies, instead. It's amazing. Not even one Japanese person in ten has ever seen a Japanese movie. Everybody goes to see *Titanic*.

Peter Grilli: *So then, in that situation, the whole question of whether the films actually reflect the society as it is or whether they're interested only in the aspirations of the society as in "wish-fulfillment" films . . . the whole issue becomes irrelevant.*

Donald Richie: Yes, irrelevant. What you're seeing now is the aspirations of the *producers*—not the audience. The producers think they know what the audience wants to see. And since we've now reached the point that the only audience going to the movies is very young people, they make movies just for the kids.

One thing that I find fascinating right now is that Japanese films—very ironically—have begun imitating Korean films. Korean films, for the most part, are really sentimental love dramas, gooey, treacly pictures about young folks. Films or TV series like *Winter Sonata* are hugely popular in Japan now, and are being copied by young Japanese moviemakers with great delight.

You know, all filmmaking countries copy each other like crazy. For example, we have a *Ring* in Japan, and then a *Ring* re-make in America. We have the genre of Japanese horror movies that has become "J-Horror" in America.

Peter Grilli: *I find it really intriguing that Japan has turned on so much to Korean films, despite all the old stereotypes and awful prejudices about Korea and the Koreans. They are considered inferior, they smell of garlic . . . all those terrible things. And Koreans hate Japanese, too, for so many historical reasons. How do you account for this incredible coming together of Japanese and Koreans through films these days?*

Donald Richie: I don't know. I just don't know. I'd like to understand this better. Some social critics say that the Japanese have a "collective bad conscience" or a "guilt complex" about Korea. But I don't think that has much to do with it at all.

The other thing is that Japanese contemporary culture is so bland, so anodyne, so concerned with—well, you know—Pokémon and other such chirpy, infantile, mechanistic things—that it doesn't really speak to anyone any more. And so, people are searching for alternatives. *Titanic* offers one kind of alternative, and Sandra Bullock offers another.

But Korea offers an alternative that Japanese know something about. Another reason that is often given is that the Japanese have grown nostalgic about Korea. They see Korea as what Japan used to be, say twenty or thirty years ago, before it became so rich and before the bubble burst. "Korea is where we used to be, back in a time when love and human feelings really meant something. Wouldn't it be nice if we could feel that way again?"

Peter Grilli: *Let's talk for a moment about Japan on a larger, global scale. People outside Japan often worry about whether Japan knows, understands, and ultimately accepts its position in*

today's world affairs. Are Japanese people still thinking the familiar old questions like: "What does the world think about Japan? What is our identity—Our role in the world? What is Japan's position vis-à-vis Asia?"

As one example, I'm sure you remember the movie called Nihon Chimbotsu (Japan Sinks). It must have been made in the late 60s or early 70s, and was based on Sakyō Komatsu's famous novel of the same name. That movie has been recently remade in Japan (though I haven't yet seen the remake).

One of the major messages of the original version of Japan Sinks—aside from all the horror and destruction about shifting tectonic plates and earthquakes and volcanic eruptions that cause the Japanese islands to disappear under the sea—aside from all that was a subplot I found extremely compelling. It had to do with a band of Japanese survivors, people who escape from the final disastrous sinking of Japan on an ocean liner that goes out over the ocean. These are the only Japanese left in the world—the "Japanese Ark"—and no one takes them in! There is no port in the world that will accept the Japanese. No country that wants them. They are utterly alone in the world, without friends, without safe haven. Now that's a pretty powerful message! Komatsu's novel and the film seemed to reflect a theme that has long reverberated in Japanese thinking about their place in the world.

How do Japanese today think about that? Do they know their role in the world? And are they comfortable with it? Do they still feel that they are not understood by the rest of the world, not adequately appreciated, and ultimately not wanted? Do they feel accepted in the world system—with its security alliances and the like—or is there still a sense of nervousness about this fundamental issue of survival?

Donald Richie: What a big question! I'm not sure I can deal with all of that! Well, first of all, the new version of *Japan Sinks* has changed the storyline so that all of the rest of the world collapses and is destroyed. Only Japan remains. All the survivors from world disasters now come to Japan, where it is they who are not wanted. This sort of reflects how things are now in Japan—you know, after the invasion of Iranian immigrants and returnees from Brazil, and all the trouble they've been causing in Japan. Yet the Japanese government keeps saying that we have to have immigrant labor to do all the dirty work for us. But we don't really want them here. We need them only because we don't want to do such dirty, badly paid work ourselves.

But everyone is of two or three minds about this. On the surface, certainly, people accept foreigners—at least in the cities—even if they feel that they don't belong in Japan. In the big cities, people by and large don't even notice foreigners any more. You occasionally still find instances where foreigners complain bitterly that no one will sit next to them on the subway or that no one will wait on them in a store. But there may be other reasons than xenophobia for things like that. I don't think you can simply blame their foreignness for it. That doesn't have much to do with it any more.

On the other hand, the Japanese government is turning increasingly more hawkish and it seems to be becoming increasingly nationalistic. And throughout society there's more of a quality of exclusivity and xenophobia, one that insists that Japan is unique and different from the rest of the world and that foreigners are not welcome.

Japan meanders along these paths and hasn't really made up its collective mind about any of these issues, I think. As far as its position in

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the world goes—well, it really doesn't have one! Japan has been under America for so long—some say “under America's thumb” and others say, more charitably, under America's defense umbrella—that it has been able to spend all its money and energy on other things. Like enriching itself. Japan has worked hard and has gotten rich. And now it is realizing that America alone may not be able to hold up that umbrella much longer. So that is why some people, like Tokyo's Governor Ishihara, think Japan has to have its own army again. That it needs to build a strong independent military, in order to defend Japan.

The Japanese man-on-the-street is absolutely befuddled and bewildered by these arguments, I would think. But I don't believe there's any general agreement about what Japan's place in the world should be. Everyone wants Japan to have a seat on the Security Council of the United Nations, for example, but, to the man-on-the-street, that is just a symbolic indication that Japan has finally become a full-fledged member of the community of nations. But of course no one knows what that really means. For years, Japan has been trying to buy its way in by giving money away. Japan gives foreign aid to nearly everyone, and is far and away the biggest aid donor in the world today. Its money goes ostensibly to help other, less fortunate people. But a lot of this is simply an attempt to buy its way into membership in the circle of leading nations.

Japan's future and its position in the world are up for grabs, I think. In Japan these days, the people who are grabbing the headlines about such things are the nationalists, the right wing that would like Japan to have a much more clearly defined role.

Peter Grilli: *Do you think the man-in-the-street cares deeply about this? Is he comfortable with that nationalist position? Or is he confused?*

Donald Richie: I just don't know. The man-on-the-street that I see is an anodyne, so utterly coddled and pacified. He has been raised on Walkman and TV. His eyes and brain are full of *manga* cartoons. He thinks that Doraemon is real. He and his friends are forever e-messaging each other. I just don't know what he is thinking—if anything.

Peter Grilli: *That's rather scary, isn't it? It sounds as if Japan might just be swept away by any kind of strong leader.*

Donald Richie: Doesn't it just! Doesn't it just? It's as though these people have been softened up for takeover. That's what I fear. Japan is being softened up no less than the people of the Weimar Republic were softened up in the 1930s. And I very much fear that some really charismatic leader is going to come along and snap up the country.

Peter Grilli: Abunai desu ne! (“How dangerous!”)

Donald Richie: *Honto ni abunai desu ne.* (How truly dangerous!) But maybe that's just my old age talking. I don't know.

Peter Grilli: *Since this magazine is read mainly by American teachers and professors, I'd like to ask your thoughts about studying Japan and Asia. Is there a lot that we can learn from Asia, and specifically from Japan? What can we learn from the Japanese example? And, fundamentally, why should we learn from Asia?*

Donald Richie: Hmmm . . . ? Yes, I think that last question is the operative one. The “why?” question. I am always of two minds about this. I think that Eleanor Roosevelt's idea of “one world” or “one peace-loving world” is OK, as far as it goes. But, at the same time, the fact that we are actually becoming one world is—for me, at least—a hideous notion, a terrifying possibility!

You see, I think diversity should be held aloft and cherished for as long as possible. But I also believe in a certain inexorable physical law that says Things Always Get Worse. And so, the idea of learning from

With Suzuki, I came to recognize that it wasn't simply or necessarily a duality that guided the world. In other words, between black and white there is something called gray.

another nation or culture very often means “taking” from the other. In appropriating from the other culture, you always have your own agenda, and you choose to take only those things that are useful to you or that somehow apply to your own needs. This can be very, very useful.

From a broader, educational point of view, though, anything that you can find outside your own self or your own views—anything that can give you an alternative way of looking at the world—is a good thing.

Peter Grilli: *You mean, it opens your mind?*

Donald Richie: Yes, it opens your mind! It enlarges the possibilities for greater thought.

When I was studying under the great Zen philosopher Daisetz Suzuki in Kamakura—actually, “studying” is not the word for it—Suzuki realized immediately that he didn't have any Zen material in me, so we just sat together on a sofa and talked. Watching how his mind worked, I realized in him that there is a way of thinking about the world that had never occurred to me before. I'd certainly never discovered anything like it in Lima, Ohio!

With Suzuki, I came to recognize that it wasn't simply or necessarily a duality that guided the world. In other words, between black and white there is something called gray. And I'd never really understood that before. I found out that this was one of the things that—at that point—animated all Japanese thought. I realized that there was a way of thinking that I didn't know anything about.

Well, that not only blew my mind, it blew my mind wide open! So, in that case, what I learned then was of great value to me.

Peter Grilli: *When you say “Lima, Ohio,” can we take that as a label for something more than just the town of your birth?*

Donald Richie: Yes. At that point—and I'm talking about when I left Lima, in 1942—black and white was the way people thought and saw things in America and in Europe. But it was not necessarily the way people saw things in Asia because of the extraordinary differences in history and religion and so forth.

Christianity is a religion that insists upon polarity: good and evil, right and wrong, black and white. Without God, after all, you don't have the Devil. But there are alternative ways of thinking. And as a young man in Japan I stumbled across one such alternative—and it changed my life!

So, yes, there is plenty to be learned from Asia and Japan. But then, there's plenty to be learned from any place, if you bother to look. And there is especially much to be learned from countries that have managed to preserve their traditional cultures intact, or almost intact. Like Korea, divided though it is; like Japan, decimated though it is; like China, burgeoning though it is. They all offer alternative points of view, alternative ways of thinking about things, and that should always be considered valuable. ■

BOOKS BY DONALD RICHIE

Peter Grilli's Recommendations

Since Donald Richie has written more than fifty books on Japan, each of them memorable and valuable, it's not easy to select only a few titles from his extraordinary body of work. Here are several of my favorites:

The Inland Sea

(Stone Bridge Press, 2002; originally published by Weatherhill, NY & Tokyo, 1971)

This book is Richie's masterpiece and one of the world's finest examples of travel literature. Ostensibly, it is an account of a trip through Japan's Inland Sea. The book is an extended essay on Japan and the Japanese people. It is also a journey into the soul of the author.

The Films of Akira Kurosawa

(University of California Press, 3rd edition, 1999)

Richie's comprehensive study of the life and work of Japan's most celebrated film director is one of the best books on any film director from any culture.

A Hundred Years of Japanese Film: A Concise History, with a Selective Guide to DVDs and Videos

(Kodansha International, 2005)

This book is the distillation of Richie's six decades of viewing and writing about Japanese cinema. Together with Richie's *The Japanese Film: Art & Industry* (written with Joseph Anderson) and his major studies of major film directors like Kurosawa and Ozu, this book captures the thoughts on a great national cinema by a masterful film historian and critic.

Japanese Portraits

(Tuttle Publishing Co., 4th edition, 2006)

This is a collection of brief profiles of many Japanese individuals—famous and unknown—whom Richie has befriended during his six decades in Japan. As always in Richie's writing, these portraits avoid generalization and instead capture the particular habits and idiosyncrasies of unique Japanese individuals. These portraits have been published in other collections with other titles: *Geisha, Gangster, Neighbor, Nun or Public People, Private People* or *Different People: Pictures of Some Japanese*.

The Donald Richie Reader: Fifty Years of Writing on Japan

(Ed. by Arturo Silva, Stone Bridge Press, 2001)

Donald Richie has been living and writing Japan since 1945. This volume is a splendid collection of essays, newspaper articles, excerpts from other books, portraits in words, and formal and informal pieces by the world's most creative commentator on Japan.

The Japan Journals: 1947-2004

(Ed. by Leza Lowitz, Stone Bridge Press, 2005)

Since he first stepped foot in Japan in 1947, Donald Richie has been keeping a journal of all he discovered there. Through his eyes and his clear, painfully honest pen, the country and its people emerge in all their complexity and individuality.