

Top Ten Things to Know About Japan in the Early Twenty-First Century

By Carol Gluck

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JAPAN IS NOT A SMALL COUNTRY.

Although Japan is sometimes compared in size to the state of California, it is probably better to think of such things in national terms. In that case, Japan is two-thirds the size of France, one-quarter bigger than Italy or Great Britain, and three-quarters larger than the Korean peninsula. Geographically, the United States, Russia, and China are very big countries, while Japan is something more like “normal size.”¹

But geographic size does not itself determine world power, and “small countries” like England and the Netherlands once wielded enormous economic and military might. Today, as the second largest national economy after the United States, Japan is a “big country” in terms of economic power.

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Why then do Japanese people so often describe Japan as a “small island country”? Because it is small in comparison to the countries that have dominated its history: China, the historical great power in East Asia, and the United States, the global superpower in the twentieth century. Japan also seems small to Japanese because it is mostly mountainous, with eighty percent of its nearly 128 million population crammed into some sixty cities.

And because Japan is a country of four main and many outlying islands, it is indeed surrounded by the sea, which in past times often seemed to protect and isolate Japan from the rest of the world.

No longer, for there are no island countries in the global economy. So while we understand why Japanese feel their land to be small (and vulnerable), Japan’s size must be measured in relative terms. In natural resources, Japan is tiny compared to Brazil or Canada. In national product, Japan is large compared to Italy or France, if not to the European Union as a whole. Militarily, Japan may be big in relation to most of the world’s countries but it shrinks mightily when the referent is China or the United States. Japan looms larger again when the measure is international creditors carrying the enormous US national debt: Japan is currently the largest holder of treasury securities, and together with China accounts for more than forty-seven percent of America’s foreign-owned debt. Take a look at *The State of the World Atlas* to see how the size of countries varies in relation to what is being measured. Size, it turns out, is always relative.²

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JAPAN IS NOT EXOTIC.

Contemporary Japan is a modern society, an instance of the multiple patterns of modernity that characterize the twenty-first-century world. Images of samurai and sumo wrestlers, of geisha and cherry blossoms should not mislead: Japan is no exotic Lotusland, no topsy-turvy Asian version of Western-style modernity, as nineteenth-century Westerners once liked to think of it. If modernity, broadly defined, entails industrialization, the nation-state, expanded political participation, forms of middle-class or mass society, and inescapable integration in the world, then there is no single way to be modern—no Western way, no Asian way. Indeed, as any glance at the globe will show, modernity is notoriously uneven in its contemporary appearances. Yet there are patterns held in common. Modern Japan is a variant of a pattern of modernity, which though it is by no means the only pattern is one that Americans know quite well. It includes a capitalist economy, a democratic politics based on representative parliamentary government, a large middle class as the social basis for both capitalism and democracy, and active engagement in global relations of power.³

To know Japan today, begin with modernity as a shared experience: think first of commonality, and only then of difference.

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JAPAN IS DIFFERENT.

France and Germany, Canada and Korea are different, too. This is because the common patterns of modernity take diverse local forms. Capitalism operates differently in different places, shaped by the historical ecology of its surroundings. Compared to the United States, Japan's "moderated capitalism" has what Americans consider an unacceptably high degree of government involvement in the private sector. Compared to France, the Japanese state's penetration of the political economy seems, in the French context, quite normal. Here one might argue that it is not Japan but the United States that is unusual. In fact, since the United States and Japan are apt to represent the extremes of many particular patterns, it is often better to spread such national comparisons around, looking at Germany, Taiwan, and elsewhere in order to locate better the sites of difference.

Democracy, too, is differently construed in different contexts. In Japan, democracy tends to be defined socially as coequal access to material and social goods. This social spreading of benefits is considered fundamental, more basic perhaps than political criteria like voting or elections. Democracy in the contemporary world takes many shapes, some emphasizing popular politics, others socio-economic well-being, but usually combining some mixture of both, in different combinations.

The notion of the middle classes in Japan reflects the social definition of democracy. For years polls reported that over ninety percent of Japanese considered themselves to be middle-class. Of course, this is a statistical impossibility, since the "middle" disappears if all of society claims to be in it. It is also inaccurate, representing a kind of social fairy tale that denies the realities of socio-economic difference. Although France, the United States, Singapore, and other societies showed similarly inflated results of middle-class self-perception during the prosperous postwar decades, it is nonetheless true that the notion of nearly-all-Japanese-as-middle-class (literally, "middle-stream") conveys a collectively imagined sense of democratic society as providing shared benefits in livelihood and lifestyle. Rather than striving ever upward in economic mobility and wealth, as Americans typically do, the self-declared middle class suggests a social leveling effect that concentrates on status, education, and human relations in the sphere of everyday life. And since many people in other far less well-off societies envisage democracy in just these social terms, Japan, once again, is different but scarcely unique.

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IN JAPAN, SOCIETY IS PRIMARY.

As suggested by the social definition of democracy, human relations and the social order constitute the primary foundational and operational values in Japan. Overlapping social relationships in the family, community, and the workplace guide individual actions; intersecting social networks determine alignments in business, politics, and the arts. While this is true everywhere, the social web seems stronger and more determining in societies like Japan, China, Iran, and many others. (Here again, the Euro-American preference for laws and abstract principles may be considered the world's exception rather than its rule).

Preservation of the social order, which supports the web of human relationships, is thus of primary importance. Actions or persons that disrupt the social order are resisted while those that support it are encouraged. The result is a strongly coherent and cohesive society capable of considerable feats of change and continuity. But the strength can also be a weakness, because its effectiveness depends on social closeness, which excludes people who are not part of the historically created web of connections. For insiders Japanese society may seem like a warm bath; for outsiders, such as minorities or immigrants, it is often a cold shower.

To understand and explain phenomena in Japan, whether in politics, economics, culture, or international relations, the guiding principle remains: always look to the social.

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JAPANESE NATIONAL IDENTITY IS STRONG.

Japanese culture is at once hybrid and extremely open to foreign influence—for centuries, from China; in modern times, from the West—and at the same time, extremely tenacious in preserving its own cultural forms. The rapid changes that followed waves of intensive cultural borrowing in the eighth, seventeenth, and nineteenth centuries were soon Japanized into a seemingly seamless appearance of cultural continuity.⁴

The two traits of openness and adaptation are related: from earliest times Japan looked into the mirror of the foreign and defined itself in its reflection. “Japanese” identity emerged out of close interactions with China in earlier times. Had cultural relations been more distant, the assertions of Japanese identity might not have been so insistent. Long before the challenge of nineteenth-century Western imperialism sparked the defensive formation of a modern nation-state and a new reflection of itself in the mirror of the West, Japan had become accustomed to defining itself as “Japanese” against the image of a cultural other.

If, as some say, the great theme of Chinese history is unity; that of Indian history, continuity; then the corresponding theme of Japanese history would be identity. To understand the ways in which Japan's strong identity-consciousness was historically produced is not, however, to accept it at face value. Even though Japanese claims to distinctiveness, even uniqueness, constitute the core of Japan's national identity, they reflect psychological and ideological needs rather more than they do the realities of Japan's modern history. In uncertain international times, when the mirror of the foreign was shaken or in shards—as it seemed to Japanese to be in the 1930s and again in the 1990s—such claims took the form of heightened nationalism. In the 1930s, this nationalism led Japan, and other nations, to protectionism, expansion, and war. In the 1990s, the end of the cold war raised nationalistic anxieties around the world, including the “advanced-country nationalism” of countries like France, Japan, and the United States. But for Japan and others, the globalized world also meant that definitions of national identity now included a strong and positive presence in international diplomacy and contribution.

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5

CHANGE IN JAPAN TENDS TO BE INCREMENTAL.

Even when change is extremely rapid, as it was after the Meiji Restoration of 1868 and after the defeat in World War II in 1945, change in Japan tends to occur—or to disguise itself as occurring—in an incremental fashion. This disguise helps to preserve institutional stability and, even more important, the social order that underlies it. The foreign media stereotype that depicts Japan either as engulfed by headlong change, or resistant to any change at all, overlooks this inching but steady incrementalism.

According to my modestly titled “Grand Unified Theory of Japanese History” (the Gluck Theorem), the public enunciation of crisis in Japan is often dramatic, as it is in the current case of the low birth rate (“Women refuse to marry and bear children”) or in the long-lasting economic recession of the 1990s (“Warning from 2020: When Japan Disappears”). But the actual tempo of change leans toward measured calibration of existing practices and institutions rather than radical measures or frontal attack. Nonetheless, change occurs—or accumulates—sometimes with profound effect.⁵

The response to recession during Japan’s “lost decade” of the 1990s followed just this pattern. After the economic bubble burst, neither the government nor corporations were willing to make radical or sweeping cuts even as they pursued the *risutora* (restructuring) of their financial and corporate systems. Companies avoided massive layoffs, failing banks were

propped up, and government spending for public works soared—all to avoid the social dislocation that might accompany more dramatic reform. And while the pace of economic change appeared maddeningly glacial to outside (especially American) observers, it seemed faster than quicksilver to Japanese, who in effect learned to live with recession while the effects of reform accumulated. By 2008, the economy, though still spoken of

in crisis terms, had a shape that had been considerably altered step by careful step.

The rule of measurement in assessing how history happens in Japan is therefore to attend to the incremental changes, not to the announced crisis but to the historical adjustments occurring on or just below the social surface.

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JAPANESE SOCIETY IS CHANGING SHAPE.

The social surface in Japan is undergoing changes of its own, some related to the economy, others to shifting demographic, political, and cultural trends common to developed countries in the twenty-first century. As the theory of incremental change states, Japanese media and government tend to view these trends as a crisis of social value and national identity. And as is so often the case, women and youth are singled out as exemplars of perilous social change. The prospect of a shrinking population, for example, has engendered public concern since the 1980s, at first because of Japan’s rapidly aging society. Japan is now the oldest society in the world, with its population over sixty-five at more than twenty per cent, and growing. An ever lower fertility rate compounds the problem, which—although the rate of 1.3 children per woman in 2007 is not much different from that of Italy or Germany—is usually treated as a distinctively Japanese danger. A government minister’s call to “birth-giving machines,” i.e., women, to do their best to increase the population was deservedly met in 2007 with both female and male derision. What more distinguishes Japan from a number of other aging and low-birth-rate societies is the extremely low inflow of immigrants. Japanese society remains one of the least open to permanent foreign residents, discriminating even against fourth-generation resident Koreans and resisting the more recent waves of economic

migrants from poorer countries. In 2006, Japan's population began to shrink and will continue to do so, though with what effect the forecasters of doom do not know.

Youth, meanwhile, who their elders expected to be working hard to drive Japanese prosperity forward, were chastised for hunkering down in their rooms, playing video games, and obsessively following *manga* and *anime*. Such self-absorbed "geeks" were joined by young adults, dubbed "parasite singles" by the media, who preferred to go on living with their parents rather than join the work force. And a growing number of youth who did go to work abstained from fulltime employment and instead became "freeters" (from "free-lancers"), thus choosing to retain their personal freedom rather than submit to the pattern of the "salary-man" working for and loyal to a single company for life.

By the first decade of the twenty-first century, the myth of the middle class had begun to dissolve into mounting concern about increasing social and economic stratification. In this "disparity society," as it is called, the gap between rich and poor was growing, access to education and opportunity was constricted, and the social basis for democracy threatened. In part, the new attention to the "lower stream" of society belatedly recognized what had long been a social fact. But it was equally true that Japan was experiencing phenomena common to other developed capitalist countries, which also regarded youth, women, immigrants, and the poor as the (negative) symbols of socio-economic change.

All of these trends appeared larger and more dramatic in public discourse than in social reality: in fact, in 2008 most Japanese women were still having babies and most Japanese youth seeking and finding employment. But the announcement of crisis in these examples, as in others such as education, housing, and rural life, reflects real social change that betokens the end of Japan's "long postwar," an era that lasted from the 1940s into the 1990s, at least in people's consciousness and attitudes.

And yet, the tenacity of the Japanese social fabric as it undergoes incremental change remains strong, stronger perhaps than its counterparts elsewhere. It is thus misleading to judge Japanese society by its constant cries of crisis, since they are more like the rhetorical foam that rides the underlying and long-enduring social waves to shore.

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3

JAPAN IS A GLOBAL POWER.

Despite my warning against believing the rhetoric of dire change, it does seem as if the present Japanese sense of confronting a new age is not altogether misplaced, especially in regard to Japan's place in the world. First, there is the point about "no more models," often expressed in the slogan that Japan has now "caught up with and overtaken" the West. If China provided cultural sustenance for centuries and the West appeared as the civilizational model since the late 1800s, then it may be that for the first time in its history, Japan has no specific external mirror in which to seek its future and define its identity, but must find the future in and for itself.

Second, and similarly, Japan's place in the world has changed. Long a part of an East Asian regional order centered on China, Japan sought from the nineteenth century to enter a world order dominated by Euro-American nations. In both instances, Japan followed the

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lead of other, greater powers. Now a world power itself, Japan is called upon not only to follow but to lead—to make an “international contribution,” as Japanese say. Considering that Japan’s historical strength lay in an internal social order with a capacity for adaptive change, it makes sense that finding a place for itself in the post-cold-war world presents a challenge so often described as “unprecedented.”

Long dependent on the outside world for trade and natural resources, Japan’s economy, and increasingly its popular culture, is global in its reach.

For three decades the sole Asian member of the G-7 (now G-8) group, Japan has participated in this exclusive club of “advanced industrial economies” that gather in annual summit meetings. Closely allied with the United States by a security treaty, Japan figures in the US-dominated security structures in the region, and has long followed America’s lead in foreign policy. In its own right, Japan is a major foreign aid donor to the de-

veloping world, and, as the second largest financial contributor to the United Nations, has lobbied for decades for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council.

Although Japanese frequently speak of a “borderless world” and the proverbial global village, most of Japan’s postwar international activity has been economic. Long dependent on the outside world for trade and natural resources, Japan’s economy, and increasingly its popular culture, is global in its reach. More difficult than Toyotas, PlayStations, and sushi, however, are the global demands of geopolitics and, in particular, issues of armament and security. Sending uniformed troops abroad, for example, even as part of UN peacekeeping operations in the 1990s, ran up against the popular pacifism supported by the Japanese public since the Second World War.

Nor does Japanese society globalize easily, whether in accepting foreign workers in Japan or in Japanese adapting to foreign contexts where their accustomed social networks do not operate. But because there is, finally, no retreat from global engagement, incremental changes are occurring even in these most resistant corners of the so-called island country.

After the end of the cold war in 1989, Japanese commentators began to talk of “Asianization,” often implying a turn away from Euro-America toward Asia.

2

JAPAN IS RE-ORIENTING.

As part of its international realignment in the 1990s, Japan began to turn toward Asia for the first time since World War II. Japanese imperialism and aggressive war against its neighbors meant that Japan began the postwar era with a particularly bad past in Korea, China, and other Asian countries. And because of its tight postwar alliance with the United States during the cold war, Japan spent the next half century facing the Pacific, with its geopolitical back turned toward the Asian mainland. After the end of the cold war in 1989, Japanese commentators began to talk of “Asianization,” often implying a turn away from Euro-America toward Asia.

This kind of talk in Japan coincided with new Asian initiatives to define Asia on its own terms. The emergence of organizations like APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) began to forge a geo-economic regional identity, and the ideological rhetoric of “Asian values” posited a geo-cultural identity set against that of the West.

For Japan (unlike Malaysia, for example) this move toward Asia was at first fraught with ambivalence. This is because only in the 1990s did Japanese begin openly to confront their wartime past to the satisfaction of other Asians and also because many Japanese did not feel themselves particularly close to Asia after so long an identification with other, Western parts of the geopolitical world. But in the past two decades, ties with Asia have deepened. In 2008 China replaced the United States as the largest market for Japanese exports, and Asia now

accounts for nearly half of Japan's foreign trade. Relations with Korea, whose people have not forgotten the brutalities of the nearly half-century of Japanese colonialism, have improved dramatically, symbolized for many by the 2002 World Cup held jointly in Tokyo and Seoul and the subsequent "Korean wave" in Japanese popular culture. Meanwhile, Japanese *manga* and *anime*, pop songs and fashion, have expansive new reach throughout Asia.

The rise of China and India as global economic powers has prompted much talk of our living in an "Asian century." Such a century presents at least three challenges for Japan. First, it will soon have to resolve what Chinese and Koreans call its "history problem," which means formal acknowledgment of its wartime actions in Asia. Second, it will have to find some, probably multilateral, way to participate in security relations with Asia that does not involve competing militarily with China. Third, it will have simultaneously to "re-orient" without turning its back on the United States or the West. For as a global power, Japan has now to face in all directions at once.

And the Number One thing to know about Japan is that NOT TO KNOW ABOUT JAPAN IS NO LONGER AN OPTION.

And not Japan alone, but to know about Japan in its regional context; and not Asia alone, but to know about Japan and Asia in a global context; and not the globe as a mere collection of regions, but to know about the interconnections, the commonalities, and the cross-relations among people (not just among nations); and not the globe as if it were something "out there" where the rest of the world lives, but the world that we must know about because we depend on it just as it depends on us. ■

NOTES

1. Henry Smith, "Five Myths about Early Modern Japan," in Ainslie Embree and Carol Gluck, eds., *Asia in Western and World History* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1997), 515.
2. Dan Smith, *The State of the World Atlas*, seventh ed., (London: Penguin Books, 2003); see also, www.worldmapper.org. For the national debt: US Treasury, "Major Foreign Holders of Treasury Securities," September 16, 2008 at <http://www.ustreas.gov/tic/mfh.txt>. Accessed October 9, 2008.
3. Carol Gluck, "Japan's Modernities: 1850s-1990s," in Embree and Gluck, *Asia in Western and World History*.
4. For this and other points mentioned here, see Gluck, "Patterns of the Past: Themes in Japanese History," in Embree and Gluck, *Asia in Western and World History*.
5. Carol Gluck, "Patterns of Change: A 'Grand Unified Theory' of Japanese History," *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, XLVIII (6) March 1995.

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