



A NEW JAPAN FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

An inside overview of current fundamental changes and problems

Rien T. Segers, Editor

A New Japan for the Twenty-First Century

Many people in the West portray Japan as being fixed in its ways and unable to change, and consequently risking national decline and international loss of prestige. However, Japan is, in fact, at present in a significant transition period, comparable to the Meiji Restoration of 1868 or the period immediately after the Second World War. This transition period comes with a mixture of events and situations which are difficult to interpret, for both foreign and domestic commentators and decision makers. In this book a range of senior experts from inside Japan outline the many considerable changes currently taking place in a wide range of fields, including the economy, business and technology, politics, governance and international relations, and a wide range of social issues – the media, the position of women, nationalism and national consciousness, and religion. Overall, the book provides a corrective to misplaced Western and Eastern views; it aims to redirect stereotyped thinking about contemporary Japan inside as well as outside the country. In addition, it gives a summary overview of contemporary Japan, its current changes and problems – in short, the inside story of the second strongest national economy in the world, which is in the process of fundamental re-engineering and which will continue to have a huge impact globally in the future.

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Editor

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Preface

The background to this book

Contemporary Japan is faced with a severe perception gap in which the distance between developments in Japan and how they are perceived abroad is rather wide. The distance can be said to be so large that the distorted perception is detrimental both for the foreign countries in which those perceptions are being constructed as well as for Japan itself. This consistent perception gap, which I saw in my daily life in Japan as well as in my reading and viewing of the Western media in this respect, was the initial drive to compile a book such as this.

While the idea of such a book dates back a long time, its direct cause lies in a company visit I conducted to the Toyota factories some years ago. It was an impressive visit, based on Toyota's information concerning their most recent technological results, planning and strategy: the Toyota Prius was in the making! That very week I found *The Economist* in my mailbox with an article about Japanese car makers. *The Economist* concluded in that article that Toyota was vulnerable 'to the fact that, although its cars delight and its factories astound, its management remains distinctly old fashioned and Japanese [!]'. My perception from the inside, from the Toyota plant and the stunning developments there, however, appeared to be completely the opposite to the outside, Anglo-American perception in *The Economist*. Later developments justified the superiority of the inside over the outside perception. For instance, the Toyota Prius became Car of the Year in 2005, based on its advanced hybrid technology and sophisticated design, and in the first quarter of 2007 Toyota took over from General Motors as the number one car maker in the world.

To this Toyota example many others could be added. Let me give here just one concerning 'change' as such. As far as change in itself is concerned, many opinion leaders in the West have as their basic perception that Japan is unable to change and is more or less 'on the road to ruin', as *The Economist* put it so nicely (7 September 2002). The sun has chosen to rise in a neighbouring country, China, but no longer in Japan itself, according to a continuing Western perception. But the reality in Japan is different. Not only will the chapters of this book testify to this, but currently at the Cabinet level, the so-called Innovation 25 Strategy Council, led by Minister of State Sanae Takaichi, is busy drafting a report in which 'change' and 'innovation' are considered the key strategies for a New Japan in the Twenty-First Century. This Council sees Japan in 2025 as a model nation for the

world, with a society that allows lifelong health, safety, assurance and diversity, and which as a nation helps to address global issues and open its doors to the world. (See: www.kantei.go.jp/foreign/innovation/index_e.html.)

The initial idea for a book such as this was also based on the fact that there are enough interpretations concerning contemporary Japan available in Western languages (mainly, however, in English) constructed by Western observers (mainly, however, by Americans). Contemporary Japanese developments covered by Western journalists and academics are readily available, especially in English, to which also non-English speakers in the West have easy access. That means that the foreign perspective – contemporary Japan as seen through Western eyes – is relatively well covered, despite the diminished interest in Japan due to the rise of China, which is perceived as more easily accessible and faster to deal with than Japan. Moreover, the perception of China is associated with a market of an almost mythical size.

As a necessary contrast, I thought it would be interesting to put together a book concerning developments in contemporary Japan, seen primarily through Japanese eyes, but introduced, structured and summarized by a foreign research director. In 2003 I met Heita Kawakatsu, at that time Professor at the International Research Centre for Japanese Studies (Nichibunken) in Kyoto. We discussed the ins and outs of such a project and he wanted to help in realizing such a book.

In 2006–2007 I was appointed as a Visiting Research Professor at Nichibunken with compiling a book consisting of an overview of current fundamental changes in Japan being a main task. The idea was to select a number of fields that are crucial for Japan's attempts to escape the standstill of the 1990s, the so-called lost decade, by introducing fundamental changes. The chapters should be written by Japanese experts while the structure and philosophy of the book should be developed by the foreign research director, obviously in close consultation with the Japanese specialists. The following 13 fields were selected, in the order in which they appear in this book: economy, technology, politics, civil society and non governmental organizations, foreign policy, (cultural) globalization, television commercials, education, historical consciousness, position of women, religion, nationalism and national identity. An extensive introduction and a concluding chapter were added to give the 13 chapters the necessary background and to draw some major conclusions from them.

The collaborators in each field were asked to reflect on what they considered to be major changes in their field of expertise and then to write their reflections as a chapter for the book. Three discussion meetings were organized in the International Research Center for Japanese Studies in Kyoto and in addition the editor was in frequent contact with the contributors. It goes without saying that this book does not purport to give a *complete* overview of *all* current and major changes occurring in Japan.

The book has two important limitations. First of all the realization of the aim of completeness – if that could ever be attained – would involve the publication of a whole series of books. Apart from the fields represented here, areas such as the ageing of the population, arts and literature, business, defence and military

operations, the environment, employment and unemployment issues, information technology, law, medical care, the service sector and many others should be added. That would make the picture more complete.

The second important limitation concerns the necessarily restricted scope of each particular chapter. Obviously, it is impossible in one chapter to outline all changes within a particular field; that would imply a book in itself. That means that each author has selected a particular aspect of his or her domain. For example, the chapter on education focuses on higher education; the changes occurring in the kindergarten, primary and secondary school systems are not dealt with. And even in the selected area of higher education choices had to be made about what to present and what not.

The major objective of the book is based on the hypothesis that a thorough analysis of a major aspect in each of the 13 fields can function as a test case. On that basis, by surveying all 13 analyses a reliable impression can be inferred concerning what changes, and especially what kind of changes, are taking place in contemporary Japan, and in addition what their implications are for the future of the country. It is the task of the concluding chapter (15) to give the reader this particular perspective.

The realization of the book's objective was not easy and has drawn heavily on the excellent collaboration of many people to whom I owe many thanks. There is first of all Professor Heita Kawakatsu, President of Shizuoka University of Art and Culture and a former Professor of the International Centre for Japanese Studies in Kyoto, who stimulated this project from its beginning stage. Then there are the 13 contributors who each generously took time off their busy schedules to write a chapter for the book. I am also very grateful for the editorial help I received from Mr Ian C. Stirk (Osaka University of Foreign Studies) and his investment of time and thought concerning the honing of the text.

The International Research Centre for Japanese Studies invited me for a Visiting Professorship during the academic year 2006–2007. It proved to be the ideal working environment for the realization of this project. I am very grateful for the Centre's hospitality and its provision of all necessary means to complete the project. I am especially indebted to the library staff for their professional assistance. I also would like to thank Ms Yukiko Okuno, Ms Yasuko Omura, Ms Ayako Sasaki and Ms Tomoko Shirai for helping me in various ways at various stages of this project. During my absence from my home institution, the Center for Japanese Studies at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands, my colleagues Ms Alette Arendshorst LL.M., Dr Janny de Jong, Dieneke Niks M.A. and Dr Herman Voogtsgeerd LL.M. took excellent care of the Center, its students and partners. Finally, while I was stationed in Kyoto, the nearby University of Osaka provided great hospitality from time to time; in this respect I am especially indebted to my colleagues Professors Shigeru Akita, Mamoru Fujiwara and Toru Takenaka.

Rien T. Segers
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Part I

Introduction

1 A new Japan in the twenty-first century

Introduction to a changing nation

Rien T. Segers

Japan is reinventing itself on earth – this time as the coolest nation culture.

(Washington Post, 26 December 2003)

The gap between the identity and the image of contemporary Japan

Some time ago I visited Toyota Motor Company in Toyota City close to Nagoya, as briefly described in the Preface to this book. I was briefed on its corporate strategy, on the progress made on its hybrid vehicles and on its advanced initiatives taken in innovative electronic controls. It was impressive. In that very week *The Economist* carried an article about Japanese car makers in the US, ambiguously titled ‘Twenty years down the road’.¹

The article, which carries the names of the cities of Tokyo and Detroit as at its head, starts by praising the strategy and quality of Japanese car makers and poking fun at former Ford chairman Harold Poling, who thought, twenty years ago when Japanese cars were still only manufactured in Japan, that the secret of efficient Japanese car making was ‘superhuman labourers working like crazy apes on the assembly lines back home’. The article in *The Economist* continues to talk about ‘the most efficient car factory in the world’, which is Nissan’s plant in Smyrna in Tennessee. In addition, there is an analysis of the Japanese successes in the US in terms of such basics as product quality, inventory control and market research.

Then, there is a sudden, rather unexpected turn in the tone and colour of the article, unexpected at least for those not familiar with the type of discourse used by *The Economist* vis-à-vis Japan until about September 2005. The bridge from positive to negative discourse is constructed by a stereotype: ‘But the Japanese cannot afford to be complacent’. This almost automatically invokes the reader’s question: which business can afford to be complacent nowadays? Then there comes a quick, superficial listing of things that should support that stereotype of non-complacency, based on the failure of the Indiana factory in the US of Isuzu and Subaru, the initial flop of the Toyota T100 (later a great success as the Tundra) and the fact that Mercedes and Volkswagen are expanding on the American market.

The article concludes as follows:

All this means that the Japanese have little room to make mistakes. Being bigger, Toyota can afford to run more risks than Honda. But it is vulnerable to the fact that, although its cars delight and its factories astound, its management remains distinctly old fashioned and *Japanese*.²

What is 'Japanese'? Based on *The Economist* discourse until recently, and its subsequent subtexts in most articles on Japan, it means: 'on the road to ruin'.

This article in *The Economist* is not highlighted because of its content or because Japan or the Japanese car need to be defended or even rescued, but I draw attention to it for two reasons. First of all, it was published in a serious, prestigious and highly influential magazine, implying that it is one of the major agents in constructing a contemporary global image of Japan. Second, because of the nature of its discourse, which touches on the very heart of the aims of this book, namely to show that the existing ways of looking at Japan and interpreting and evaluating this country are outdated due to a number of significant developments, which will be outlined in this chapter. These developments will detect a great discrepancy between the identity and the image of contemporary Japan, between self-image and outside image.

As mentioned, *The Economist* is a very influential magazine – for boardrooms all over the world, for government officials, investors, journalists, and even for some professors. In short, it is a magazine that is highly decisive for the image construction of the socio-economic sector of a nation, both inside and outside that nation. One negative article does not hurt, but if the subtext of articles concerning a particular country appears to be systematically based on a somewhat ambivalent, not to say negative, discourse that does not correspond with the 'reality representation' of that country, then there is something structurally wrong with the perception of that reality, with the so-called reality itself, or with both factors.

Based on the above argumentation it will be evident that the representation of Japanese reality by *The Economist* has resulted in the construction of an inadequate image. In this article *The Economist* demonstrates a discourse convention vis-à-vis a leading industrial sector in Japan that is based on a misrepresentation of the real developments in that sector. This misrepresentation is subtle, especially for superficial readers and non-specialists. It can be detected only after a careful analysis and if one has some knowledge concerning the actual situation. The essential meaning of the misrepresentation is to be found in the subtext, which makes its effect even more dangerous.

Many examples of that same discourse could be given. To mention just one additional example: former prime minister Koizumi could not do much good in the eyes of *The Economist*, at least not until his overwhelming victory in the snap elections of September 2005. Even the things *The Economist* has already been urging Japan to do for a long time – for instance to become more involved with Asian affairs – are cited against him. A case in point is the visit of the prime minister to North Korea in 2002. The magazine carried an article under the heading 'Roads

to Ruin', starting as follows: 'Which map is Junichiro Koizumi using? Having wandered a long way from his initial reform pledges, he is now trying to redirect himself by straying overseas, with a trip to North Korea ...'.³ The word 'straying' is the key to the subtext: the construction is that Mr Koizumi *is* a failure: he lost his way and the new way he found for himself is leading to just to ruin.

If content analysis is applied to *The Economist* issues concerning Japan during the years 2001–2005, the general discourse construction is that of a country that really is on the road to ruin, headed by a prime minister who is 'a dashing disappointment'. It is high time 'to abandon any remaining hope in Junichiro Koizumi'.⁴ Obviously, this statement concerns only the perception of *The Economist* for the period mentioned. No claim is made here that this is *the* American image or *the* British image. This is simply the construction of *Economist* journalists covering Japan in Tokyo, maybe in consultation with or influenced by what kind of articles and discourse the London-based headquarters would like to see. However, somewhat unfortunately for Japan, articles appearing in *The Economist* carry a lot of weight when it comes to making dominant image (and investment!) constructions.

Obviously, the above stories concerning Toyota, Koizumi and *The Economist* are more than just anecdotes; they provide two cases on the basis of which the perception gap between the identity and the image of contemporary Japan can be clearly demonstrated. They also form a justified point of departure for the claim that a reinterpretation of Japan is highly necessary. There is a major reason for this necessity, for the urgent need to bridge the gap between the identity and the image of contemporary Japan. That reason is based on the structural inadequacy of currently existing interpretive models.

The structural inadequacy of existing interpretive models concerning Japan

Since the Second World War a great number of Western journalists, observers, politicians, business people and scholars, as well their Japanese counterparts, have been active in describing, interpreting and evaluating Japanese society. Their texts are being circulated and reproduced, in the press and in academic work, as the dominant discourse on contemporary Japan. Two observations should be made concerning the status of the methodology on the basis of which many of these texts are written: the interpretive methodology itself and – more specifically – its Eurocentrism and Japanocentrism.

A first observation concerns the status of the interpretive methodology, where the question could be asked as to whether it is possible to distinguish some interpretive categories among the large volume of journalistic and (popular) academic articles, book publications and news items on radio and TV since the 1970s that have as their aim to explain what happens in Japan and how to look at Japan. The aim here is not to construct a categorization based on the contents or the themes of those publications. This would lead to the rather trivial conclusion that the interpretations of the 1970s and 1980s are mainly concerned with explaining Japan's economic success and underlining the specificity and uniqueness of its culture,

whereas the publications since the 1990s are looking for arguments and evidence to interpret Japan's supposed fall from grace. In this way it would be possible to plot each of those hundreds of publications and news reports on a scale, running from the fawning *Japan as Number One* to the vilifying *Japan as – Anything but – Number One*.⁵ The argumentation here is lined up based on a discourse which constructs Japan either as a success or as a failure.

Much more interesting and revealing than simply looking at the contents of media coverage of Japan, is focusing on the methodology and the implicit points of departure that constitute the basis of all those interpretations. In principle, there are three methodological positions that can be distinguished: a mainstream, a revisionist and a culturalist perspective.⁶

The *mainstream perspective* is based – implicitly or explicitly – on a comparative stance, where Japan is being contrasted and compared with another country, which means in most cases the USA. The reason for this comparison with the USA is not so much the striking similarities these two cultural systems share, but simply because most foreign specialists on Japan can be found in that country.

During the occupation (1945–1952), the American government seems to have tried to turn Japan into a kind of forty-ninth state (Alaska and Hawaii had not yet joined the union). Seen superficially, in the period directly after the war this seemed to work nicely. Thus Japan's constitution is indeed, for all its intents and purposes, a copy of the American. Mainstream specialists follow this lead: they view Japan as democratic, as a free-market economy and in fact as a Western nation, naturally with its own character variations, which, however, do not fundamentally deviate from its role model, the USA. Approached kindly, Japan is often interpreted as a nation deserving of emulation. It is not astonishing that the mainstreamers had their heyday in the late 1970s and 1980s when Japan was at the peak of its economic power and unchallenged in Asia. A number of them also took the position that Japan stood at the threshold of overtaking the USA's leading position in the world. Noteworthy representatives of the mainstream interpretation, whose publications have had a great deal of influence on Japan's image in the USA are, for example: Gerald Curtis, Edwin O. Reischauer and Ezra F. Vogel.⁷

Whereas the mainstream perspective focuses on Japan's similarities to the West and takes a (very) positive stance towards Japan, the *revisionist perspective*, on the other hand, is directed at constructing a fundamental difference between Japan and the West, and sometimes even between Japan and the Rest. This methodology leads to a rather negative view of Japan, in many cases based on the same data that the mainstreamers used to construct a positive image. As McCargo observed:

[They] view Japan as operating according to distinctive principles of its own: typically, they regard it as undemocratic, and as characterized by a deeply flawed political system that features a considerable degree of structural corruption. They view Japan's economic system as far more state-led and far less open to outside competition than analysts typically acknowledge. Some revisionists go so far as to see Japan as a kind of 'soft authoritarian'

state, characterized by repressive elements of social and political conformity. Revisionists typically view Japan's relations with the rest of the world with a skeptical eye, arguing that Japan cynically manipulates its trade, aid and defence policies for its own advantage.

(McCargo 2000: 4)

The heyday of this kind of Japan-bashing was during the 1980s, when Japan and the USA were at odds over trade. The final decade of the last century was a particularly good period for revisionists. Japan's economic stagnation, the large-scale outsourcing of production, the inadequate assistance after the Kobe earthquake (1995) and its limited international role were grist for the revisionist mill. Not surprisingly, their conclusion was that the enormous economic prosperity of the 1970s and 1980s was more the product of good luck than of wisdom. Representative authors of this position include Chalmers Johnson, Gavan McCormack and Yoshi Sugimoto, Clyde Prestowitz, James Fallows, and Karel Van Wolferen.⁸

The third perspective, the *culturalist*, explains the Japanese socio-economic system on the basis of an inherent cultural distinctiveness. Originally the domain of American anthropologists such as Ruth Benedict, this perspective was received by Japanese academics and journalists with open arms. For centuries the Japanese have believed that the character of their land, its inhabitants, the climate and the language were so specific that Japan boasted a unique identity. Belief in the myth of Japanese uniqueness found fertile soil last century in *Nihonjinron*, the study and theory of Japan by Japanese scholars, which reached its height in the 1970s.

In the introduction to his highly critical book on *Nihonjinron*, Peter Dale (1988) observed that the pseudo-academic *Nihonjinron* scholars argue three points. First, that the Japanese people are culturally and socially a homogeneous race whose core has remained unchanged since prehistoric times. Second, it is supposed that the Japanese radically differ from all other peoples. Third, a conscious nationalism generates great hostility to any analysis of Japanese culture by foreigners.

Since the mid-1970s, when Japanese science was internationalized, a growing number of Japanese sociologists, psychologists and anthropologists have rejected much of what *Nihonjinron* publications have put forward as speculative humbug. This, however, has not purged years of intense education in their culture's uniqueness from the minds of most Japanese. *Nihonjinron* writings employ cultural constructions consisting of many artificial oppositions between Japanese culture on the one hand and other (principally Chinese and Western) cultures on the other. For example, well-known social oppositions are: society versus community; individualism versus groupism; equality versus hierarchy; private orientation versus public orientation; rights versus duties; independence versus dependence. The first element of those oppositions is ascribed to Western culture, whereas the second element applies to Japanese culture; it is implied that the positive term refers to Japanese and the negative to Western culture.

The explanations offered for these oppositions are striking. For example, as is well known, Tsunoda (1985) hypothesized that the Japanese brain structure is

unique, as stimuli are processed in the left hemisphere, where thought processes are aimed toward producing harmony with nature. In the West, however, stimuli are processed in the right lobe, which is considered to be more rational and less harmonious.

A wide range of culturalist publications can be mentioned here; maybe the most influential ones were written by people from various backgrounds such as Chie Nakane, Takeo Doi and, as already mentioned, Tadanobu Tsunoda.⁹

The three categories into which interpretations of post-Second World War Japanese culture can be generally classified – mainstream, revisionist and culturalist – imply each a fundamentally different interpretive methodology on Japan. Of course, it is not always easy to clearly differentiate between them, and hybrid forms are also employed.

This short analysis of the three existing methodological perspectives is not designed to determine which perspective is ‘the best’, or which interpretation based on what perspective deserves first prize. Instead it is more interesting to look briefly at two important similarities that exist between the otherwise clearly different perspectives.

On the one hand, in all three perspectives there is a demonstration of a strong need not only to describe and interpret, but also to judge. Final judgement is, of course, provided by the interpreter and overwhelmingly based on his or her own value system. On the other hand, the interpretations themselves, in all three categories, are also based on the interpreter’s own sublimated value system. For instance, the Japanese Nihonjinron interpreter bases his or her analysis on his or her own Japanese frame of reference. The interpreter looks west, but only in order to confirm his or her already existing Japanese views. In many cases Western sources are consequently not read or used seriously. By contrast, the Western mainstream specialists and revisionists actually often employ the same methodology in their interpretations of Japan. They also view Japan primarily from their own interpretive conventions. It often happens that most primary sources are ignored and hardly any attention is paid to Japanese perspectives. Consequently, this provides a dominantly Western perspective.

A second observation concerning the inadequacy of existing interpretive models is directed at the Eurocentrism and the Japanocentrism involved in the interpretive methodology. Irmela Hijiya-Kirschnereit (1988: 193) has called Eurocentrism an essential problem in research on Japan. In the first two categories (the mainstream and the revisionist) we may encounter a fair amount of Eurocentrism, the imposition of Western interpretive conventions on a foreign culture. An interpretation is deemed to be complete when a particular cultural element which is ‘strange’ is adapted and translated into the interpreter’s own conventions. What holds for Eurocentrism is also true for Japanocentrism, which can be encountered in the third category (that of the culturalist perspective). If even scholarship cannot completely escape from Eurocentrism, it is not difficult to imagine what happens in the interpretive conventions of the opinion-leading institution, the media.

Eurocentrism can exaggerate the adaptation process so much that it presumes that certain important components of Japanese society are not Japanese, but

Western. As regards Japanese literature, Marleigh G. Ryan (1976) has proposed that it is necessary to counteract this Western prejudice: Western scholars should stop expecting Japanese literature to be non-Japanese. Obviously, this observation is also valid for other domains of Japanese society, such as the economy, business life, politics, religion, education and medical care.

On the other hand, in two periods of Japanese history we find an explicit form of auto-Eurocentrism, a phase in which Japan, at least within its most influential circles, accepted, adapted and promoted Western Eurocentrism. The first of these periods was the Meiji era (1868–1912), the second during the American occupation (1945–52). Harumi Befu describes Japan's auto-Eurocentrism (which he calls 'auto-Orientalism') in the post-war years as follows:

In this situation, discourse on Japan's identity of the late 1940s and the 1950s became one of comparing Japan with the West as Japan's way of convincing itself how wrong it was – a way of providing a rationale for the lost status of the wartime ideology. The West was upheld as the model and the ideal, and whatever the West had and Japan did not have was the reason for Japan's defeat and for criticizing Japan, be it its cultural traits, social institutions, or personality. Legions of Western observers, including MacArthur (who claimed the Japanese mentality to be that of a twelve-year-old), saw and analysed Japan against the mirror of their own social values, and in their free, unabated, naive ethnocentrism denigrated everything Japanese. Japanese intellectuals, in the post-war skeptical mood, were delighted to have their newfound conviction confirmed by observers from countries that represented a superior civilization and the new model for Japan.

(Befu 1997: 117)

The other side of Eurocentrism is relativism, which, as applied to Japan, is to say that Japanese cultural identity can only be interpreted and evaluated with Japanese criteria. Any Western specialist should first identify with Japan. He or she must analyse Japanese culture from the inside out and in this way learn to understand its specific conventions and institutions. 'Understanding' here means projecting oneself into the foreign culture. The greater the identification with Japan the more perfect the harmony with Japanese thought and behaviour patterns, and thus the closer one comes to the ideal interpretation.¹⁰

Relativism is the reverse of Eurocentrism, and consequently equally lopsided and objectionable. In addition to a methodological danger, Hijiya-Kirschner also points out that relativism supports the myth of Japan's uniqueness, as propagated by Nihonjinron.

Thus neither relativism nor Eurocentrism lead toward an adequate interpretation. The alternative, which Hijiya-Kirschner indicates with a quote from Helmut Plessner, denotes the correct theoretical direction, but fails to give precise information on how the theory can be put into research practice. Plessner writes: 'Comprehension does not mean identification with the other, in which the distance to the other vanishes, but familiarity with the distance so that the other can be seen

as other and simultaneously as a strange thing' (Plessner 1982: 179; my translation from German). To repeat, it remains unclear, however, how exactly one is to operate in a research situation based on this accurate philosophical pronouncement.

The above three methodological perspectives, mainstream, revisionist and culturalist, imply that the process of interpreting Japan can be characterized to a great extent by partiality or unipolarity. In many cases the interpretive process is based on a single cultural perspective: the culture to which the interpreter belongs. In practice this means that the interpretation of Japan bears a heavily American, European or Japanese etc. imprint, which in many cases contains a high degree of one-sidedness, not necessarily a virtue in journalism or scholarship. This implies that the three existing interpretive perspectives can no longer fulfil the requirements for the construction of an adequate interpretation of a rapidly changing Japan, caught between globalization and localization.

How does partiality or unipolarity work in practice and what are the consequences? In order to answer this question an article by James Fallows (1989) will be analysed from an interpretive-methodological point of view and may serve as a case in point. This article was published at the height of Japan's international economic power, 1989, a time when Japan's trade surplus was still gigantic, thanks to a series of measures and many promises on the part of the Japanese government; it should also be noted that at this time the US economy was not at its best.

Fallows' position throughout the article is very clear, stating that: 'Japan's one-sided trading will make the US-Japanese partnership impossible to sustain – unless we impose limits on its economy' (Fallows 1989: 1). His analysis employs power play with inherent rhetorical tools in order to support this position. Fallows proposes that a serious conflict has arisen between Japanese and American interests. This conflict is entirely Japan's fault: the impossibility or its unwillingness to limit the one-sided and destructive expansion of its economic power. Fallows explains:

The expansion is one-sided because Japanese business does to other countries what Japan will not permit to be done to itself. It is destructive because it will lead to exactly the international ostracism that Japan most fears, because it will wreck the post-war system of free trade that has made Japan and many other nations prosperous, and because it will ultimately make the US-Japanese partnership impossible to sustain.

(Fallows 1989: 2)

Fallows supports this perspective by pointing to the gulf between Japan's export successes and the – in his eyes – artificially suppressed domestic consumption. He also provides a statistical argument: in 1989 the US trade deficit with Japan ran at about \$1 billion per week. Another argument concerns Japan's refusal to import expensive products and Japan's deliberate attacks on noted Western corporations.

My analysis of Fallows' perspective is not so much concerned with the factual accuracy of his statistics, but rather with the discourse and the interpretive

conventions that underlie his factuality. Statistics change and can be manipulated, but interpretive conventions are tougher, and involve the mental programming of members of a particular community.

Fallows' interpretation is based on the 'obvious' fact that the US is the gold standard against which everything and everyone on the planet can be measured. Fallows believes that history has clearly proven this standard valid, and thus for him it is an incontrovertible fact. Even the Marshall Plan is paraded in order to polish up the golden American standard. Look, Fallows argues, how, in contrast to Japan, the United States works for the betterment of all. At the end of the Second World War

the United States could have completely swamped all competitors in an outright production contest. Instead, the United States rapidly and deliberately opened its markets to imports, and through the Marshall Plan it helped rebuild foreign factories so that they could produce something for Americans to buy.

(Fallows 1989: 8–9)

An interpretation in which the US is viewed as the epitome of altruism bodes poorly for any subsequent analysis of its relations with Japan. Indeed, in many places Fallows consciously or unconsciously misinterprets Japan, which he continuously measures against the American gold standard, arguing for a change in Japan's 'internal behavior'.

Fallows sees this 'wrong' internal behaviour as an important source of Japan's undoing. In contrast to 'our' weak, universal values, such as charity, democracy and world brotherhood, the Japanese base their behaviour on personal loyalty to family, teacher and boss. Fallows' knock-out blow reads as follows: 'The members of a tight-knit Japanese work group or neighbourhood will spontaneously sacrifice more for one another than their counterparts in the United States – but they are a lot less likely to sacrifice for someone outside the group' (Fallows 1989: 14). This is supposed to serve as 'explanation' for the fact that Japan places less importance on trade imbalance, since trade is being conducted with people outside of their own group!

Finally, Fallows asks how frightened the United States should be of Japan. He assures his readers that they need not prepare for an invasion and can sleep well. After all Japan is finished:

The population will soon have the world's highest proportion of retirees and will be using up some of the savings it is amassing now; Korea and Taiwan will exert unrelenting pressure; at some point the yen may rise so far that it actually does price Japanese exporters out of the world market.

(Fallows 1989: 18)

Then, the final straw, this American analyst disqualifies himself ethically by writing: 'And let's not forget the next big earthquake' (p. 18).

Fallows' interpretation rests on two pillars. First and foremost, he is guilty of gross interpretive bias which is so America-centric that his analysis mirrors perfectly the Nihonjinron theorists who employ the same biased interpretive convention, only based on the Japanese gold standard. The publication of a particularly biased interpretation of a nation is regrettable for the author, for scholarship and the nation in question. If the foreign policy of the author's country is subsequently based on this and similar articles a dangerous situation could arise. At any rate it is not altogether clear whether Fallows' article actually influenced American policy toward Japan, although Tamotsu Aoki (1996: 117) thinks it 'likely'.

Second, Fallows focuses on the exceptionality of Japanese behaviour and values, which he presents as the basis for American–Japanese conflict and the reason for Japan's 'unreasonable' economic imperialism, two phenomena otherwise not easily understood by Westerners. Fallows is not alone in this interpretation; many other Western interpreters of Japan, particularly the revisionists, do the same. This sort of interpretation begins with the negative exceptionality of Japanese culture, which is constructed so that prevailing and essential elements of Western culture are, by definition, missing. Fallows is thus concerned with elements such as fairness in trade practices or concepts such as charity, democracy and world brotherhood. In Fallows' view all these elements are clearly present in Western, but not in Japanese, culture. Factual support for this is paltry and of a dubious nature, but these principles work well as a grid for his interpretation.

Hidehiro Sonoda (2000) has attacked this kind of biased thinking. He argues that many social scientific theories take Western culture as the norm and attune their research accordingly. As soon as the subject is Japanese – or any non-Western – culture, an immediate state of alert is declared, for these cultures cannot be explained with standard theories. The exceptional nature of Japanese culture is then put forward – Fallows is merely one example of this – because certain Western standards such as democracy and charity are not based on and practised according to similar principles to those existing in the West. Sonoda believes that such theories do not deserve to be called scientific, for scholarliness implies universality.

Sonoda therefore proposes a 'theory of reverse absences' to counter the Western 'theory of absences'. This theory interprets Western nations by researching those elements that are primarily determined by Japanese or non-Western cultures. He then asks whether and to what extent these elements are also present and how they function in Western cultures. In this way Sonoda seeks to avoid the label 'unique' with which Japanese culture has been branded by Western specialists (revisionists such as Fallows) and by the Nihonjinron theorists.

The localization–globalization paradox in contemporary Japan as a new interpretive model

The context of the three interpretive models (mainstream, revisionist and culturalist) mainly consisted of the question of the extent to which Japan could reasonably be compared with the West. The basic question in all three models was

whether Japan could or could not be called a 'normal' Western country. This question and its subsequent answers have lost their validity due to significant changes in Japan itself and due to a new set of structural problems that partly have risen based on some of these changes. Those changes and problems are the topic of this book, which is based on the assumption that most fundamental changes and problems in Japan are based on the localization–globalization paradox. This paradox shows the necessity of undertaking a fundamental reinterpretation of contemporary Japan.

As is well known, Japan was hit by a great number of serious setbacks in the 1990s. To mention just the major ones: the collapse of the bubble economy, major currency fluctuations, a prolonged recession, the Great Hanshin (Kobe) Earthquake, scandals involving leading politicians, bureaucrats and corporations, the Aum Shinrikyo cult gas attacks, and increased violence and drug-related crime. All these developments have affected the very cohesion that helped Japan achieve its stunning economic success in the post-war period, eroding self-confidence and leading to reflection on the state of society. On the positive side, the shocks have also precipitated necessary changes and – on the negative side – have brought a new set of structural problems.¹¹

These developments have led to a fundamental increase in the localization–globalization debate in Japan. What should be retained of the traditional way of doing things, and what should be adapted and adopted from the ways leading foreign cultures do things? Obviously, Japan is not the only country where this discussion is being pursued. But the quality and quantity of the representation of this paradox seem to be much more manifest in Japan than anywhere else. If we examine the interrelations between cultures now, at the beginning of a new millennium, we can perceive two strong but contradictory tendencies. On the one hand we acknowledge the search for cultural authenticity, the pride in particularisms, the admiration for cultural self-sufficiency and the maintenance of national traditions. On the other hand we find the spread of a uniform world culture, an ever-growing political and economic interdependence, the emergence of supranational myths and the adoption of similar lifestyles in widely different settings.¹²

At this particular moment Japan faces a great number of catalysts for fundamental change, due to the long and intensive search for a resolution to the dramatic events that happened in the 1990s. 'Catalyst' is a concept that is, in some cases, to be preferred to the concept of 'change'. Change is an institutionalized deviation from conventional practice, realized by the help of catalysts, stimuli or incitements for change. A set of really fundamental changes in a society may result in a restoration, such as, in Japan, the Meiji Restoration or the situation in the years following the Second World War. The current socio-economic situation in Japan is such that the phase of fundamental changes in some of the major domains of society has arrived or is about to arrive. 'Change' is being used here as a *vox media*, a concept with neutral – neither positive, nor negative – meaning. The dominant connotation – both in Japan and elsewhere – of 'change' is in many cases positive, something that should be realized as soon as possible. Here the neutral meaning of the concept is chosen, since not all changes to be undertaken

in Japan (or elsewhere) are necessarily positive. One example: the dispatch of Self-Defence Forces to Iraq and Afghanistan may have the positive effect of deconstructing Japan's image of insisting on chequebook diplomacy; but it may also have the horrible effect of Japan's becoming a top priority on the target lists of international terrorists.

The catalysts for changes and the major structural problems are to be found in most domains of contemporary Japanese society. Obviously, in some domains they are stronger than in others. There are four domains in which the current changes seem to be the markers of a future 'new' Japan and which are dealt with in this book:

- Business and technology
- Politics, governance and foreign policy
- Social issues
- National identity.

Obviously, there are more domains in Japanese society in which changes, catalysts for change and problems are visible. For instance, the health care domain is not represented. Furthermore, in each of the four domains on which the essays in this book focus, it is clear that there are many more changes and problems than the ones dealt with. For instance, within the contemporary social structure of Japan demographic changes (e.g. declining birth rate and ageing) are not dealt with. Also the changes and problems concerning Japan's younger generation could not be addressed. One could think here of problems such as those of the so-called *freeters* (college graduates who work in temporary, low-paid jobs), of the *hikikomori* (youngsters who shut themselves up in a room for fear of people and society) and the *parasite singles* (young adults of thirty years and older preferring to live unmarried at home). An important change in the business domain, the privatization of the postal service, is also not covered.

It is not the intention of this book, however, to cover *all* changes and problems. The contemporary situation of Japan as a rapidly changing society makes such an all-encompassing intention a sheer impossibility. The book presents the domains and the changes and problems within each domain as cases that should show the specificity of a changing Japan. In the conclusion of this book this specificity will be outlined in more detail.

Business and technology

The Japanese business and technology domain provides first-rate changes, catalysts for change and important problems. As a background to the two chapters devoted to this topic in the book, six challenges will be explained here. They all clearly show that this domain is on the way to being completely restructured.

First of all, there are clear signs that foreign investors are becoming far more significant equity shareholders in Japanese companies. Porter *et al.* (2000: 184) give the example of Sony, where 45 per cent of the shares are held by foreigners,