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Beyond the Bubble, Beyond Fukushima: Reconsidering the History of Postwar Japan

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Abstract: Christopher Gerteis and Timothy S. George make a case for revisiting Japan's postwar history in the second decade of the twenty-first century. They argue that Japan's problematic responses to the triple disasters of March 2011 warrant re-evaluating the persistent myths of failure and success associated with Japan's "postwar" and "post-bubble" eras.



Japan's spectacular economic growth after 1945 made it an exemplar of modern capitalism for business leaders in the Americas, Europe, and especially Pacific Asia, particularly at the height of its economic dominance in the 1980s. Japan was frequently held up as a model for the development of East and Southeast Asia. Malaysia was among the first to adopt a "Look East" policy, explicitly rejecting the "western model" in favor of one attributed to Japan. In

1979, the American sociologist Ezra Vogel published *Japan as Number One*, with the subtitle *Lessons for America*. Soon, executives from the United States were visiting their former pupil and strategic junior partner to learn the secrets of its success, while Japanese hubris was reflected in the bits of gold foil one could order sprinkled on sushi at exclusive restaurants. Japan was seen - and saw itself - as the successful pioneer and model in solving the problems of late-industrial capitalism, from urban crowding to labor-management relations to pollution.

However, the collapse of mammoth real estate and stock market bubbles by 1991 launched the nation on two decades of economic stagnation punctuated by episodes of fitful growth, deflation and soul searching. The hubris that drove the 1980s - that "we had all the answers" - had collapsed. The confidence, and the certainty about national goals, slipped away in the 1990s. The bubble burst, the Cold War ended, the population aged, rural areas hemorrhaged population and struggled to stay alive, and China's era of spectacularly rapid economic growth continued even longer than had Japan's. Japan struggled to find a direction in what suddenly seemed to be a new and unfamiliar version of modernity, or postmodernity. There was much talk about the "Galapagos-ization" of Japan, a turning inward, a giving up of grand dreams and an acceptance that Japan's global role and importance might shrink to the point where the nation would be ignored rather than copied by the rest of the world. It was no surprise that one response was to remember - or imagine - a time when things had been different.

And then, after 11 March 2011, the state's ineffectual response to the triple-crises of earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disaster in northeastern Japan heightened popular debate over whether the nation was doomed to a slow decline or might yet be able to recover its



Store devastated by the March 11, 2011 tsunami, Rikuzentakata, ©Timothy S. George

vigor and discover a new path and new purposes. The flurry of international attention, including a level of media coverage on Japan not seen since the early 1990s, again brought global interest to bear on Japan's economic and social woes. Yet the content of that analysis too often suggested that Japan's successes are relevant but its failures are unique. While financial reports seemed to regularly declare Japan "out of recession," media discussions in and outside Japan after March of 2011 remained haunted by the failure to bounce back from the devastation inflicted by one of the strongest earthquakes in recorded human history. The ruins of disaster provided further fodder for dismissing Japan as irrelevant on the international political stage. Reports of Japan's demise since 1990 remain wildly overstated, to the point that it has been quite fashionable to publicly wonder whether Japan really matters anymore.²



Firehouse devastated by the March 11, 2011 tsunami, Rikuzentakata, ©Timothy S. George

This seems absurd for a country that enjoys the highest standard of living in East Asia, sustained by the third-largest economy in the world. Of course Japan matters for many reasons. It was the first non-Western nation to have a constitution and to industrialize. Japan avoided being colonized and became a colonial power itself. It plunged into a devastating war that killed tens of millions in East and Southeast Asia and the Pacific and ended with Japan as the first and only nation to suffer the horrors of nuclear warfare. In defeat, Japan arose from the ashes of war to become an even greater industrial power while simultaneously establishing itself as a vibrant, pacifist, and contentious democracy. Its modern history continues to inspire leaders in the developing world even as many citizens of those countries once occupied by Imperial

Japan remonstrate against resurgent denials of Japanese wrong-doing.

Nevertheless, dismissals of Japan's relevance have deflected attention from the ways that Japan's real problems today are shared with others. Both Japan's successes and failures hold common cause with those of the late-stage capitalist economics of the Americas, Europe and Pacific Asia. Japan's achievements - positive and negative - since the end of the nineteenth century remain highly relevant for policy makers, business leaders, and citizenry across the globe. In some respects Japan in the twenty-first century is once again leading the way, this time as the first nation in Pacific Asia to struggle with the consequences of declining industrial significance, and as the fastest-aging society in the world. Japan must finance the welfare of a population that is anticipated by 2020 to be comprised of more septuagenarians than teenagers. And perhaps most significantly, the Japanese continue to redefine their modern collective identity and their country's place in the world, as they have been doing for over 150 years.

These developments make it all the more important that the nation forge better relations with its Asia-Pacific neighbors - a task its leaders do not seem to be taking seriously

enough. Several of Japan's other problems, such as the extent to which the Japanese state will follow through on its mandate to reconstruct the quake-devastated Northeast, are also undoubtedly critical. Indeed, there is reason to doubt that the Japanese government will adequately respond given its persistent incapacity to call to heel the accident-prone nuclear industry and the diplomatic hornet's nest stirred up each time a government minister decries the veracity of Chinese and Korean memories of the Second World War.³

It seems clear that those engaged in explaining Japan's geopolitical role need to move beyond the simplistic messages of "copy this" and "beware of that." It is time to once more rethink how we explain Japan to the wider world. Our recent edited volume, [Japan since 1945: From Postwar to Post-bubble \(Bloomsbury 2013\)](#), grew out of two gatherings of scholars of postwar Japan. Unlike many pundits over the past two decades, the participants in the 2009 conference "Revisiting Postwar Japan" at Sophia University in Tokyo, and a workshop at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies in 2010, did not take for granted the value of studying Japan since 1945. In that volume, we focused on four issues: civic life, the legacies of war and military occupation, the emergence of a postindustrial economy, and the interaction of public memory with the social, political, and economic trajectories from the postwar to the post-bubble era. Our goal was to paint a more robust portrait of Japan's contemporary history by examining the social, cultural, and political underpinnings of Japan's postwar and postindustrial trajectories. More broadly, our ongoing collective goal is to cross the intellectual boundaries where history leaves off and other disciplines begin, in order to put to rest popular dismissals of Japan's relevance in the twenty-first century world.



**Election posters, Tsumago,
©Timothy S. George**

Civic Imaginations

As the term "postwar" suggests, the formative narrative and material framework for Japan today is still World War II. Japan's war in Pacific Asia from 1931 to 1945 caused the most widespread bloodshed the region had ever known, with a total cost in lives that may have reached as many as 20 million people dead.⁴ The domestic experiences of war for many ordinary Japanese was of death and severe hardship, culminating with the incendiary bombings of Tokyo and Osaka and nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In the wake of Japan's surrender in August 1945, the

international war crimes tribunals tried, convicted, and hanged only a handful of the political and military leaders most responsible for the war, leaving many issues of war responsibility unresolved. Yet the people and government of postwar Japan were remarkable for their ability to convert the experiences of the wartime era into productive, long-lived alliances with many of Japan's former enemies. This was one way that Japan became a model for the world's late industrializers.

Positioning themselves in the dual role of proconsul and tutor, the mostly American officials of the Allied Occupation of Japan (1945–1952) translated their social and political vision of democracy into a constitutional monarchy for Japan that embraced the rights of free speech, formal gender equality and a "minimum standard of cultured living." Yet, while the Allied Occupation is often characterized as a liberal "New Deal" for Japan, reactionary strains within the American political system, in particular the rise of anti-Communism and the onset of the Cold War, also had tremendous repercussions for Japan. They strengthened the hands of its more conservative politicians and left the nation no choice but to join the American side in a polarized world.

One persistent belief about Japan is that it lacked a historical tradition of an engaged citizenry. This is of course a myth – generated by and believed in by many Japanese as well



**Statues of Bakumatsu heroes
Takasugi Shinsaku and Yoshida
Shōin, Yamaguchi, ©Timothy S.
George**

as others. However, the Meiji, Taishō, and even the early Shōwa eras (1868–1912, 1912–1926, and 1926–1931) witnessed considerable right- and left-wing political activity, some of it quite radical. The postwar years saw an even greater level of civic engagement. Indeed, the postwar era was a clear example of fractious democratic capitalism, even though the huge citizens' movements of the era are rarely recalled today. As a result, the postwar era is largely remembered within the narrow, sometimes stultifying context of the "economic miracle" narrative. For some, this blind spot has the ironic – and at times convenient – consequence of obscuring the way that Japan can be a useful model for societies that hope to enjoy both economic growth and political pluralism. However, others see it as obscuring the way citizens' movements were coopted before they

could fundamentally transform the nation's political economy.

Japan's two constitutions - the Meiji constitution of 1890, and the current constitution in effect since May 3, 1947 - were both literally handed to the Japanese people from above, the former from the Meiji emperor and the latter from their postwar occupiers. The Allied Occupation, the legacies of the war and the new constitution constituted an infrastructure that the everyday citizens could do little to change. What they could control, however, was how they responded to them, and the meanings they assigned to these responses. In doing so, they were writing new chapters in the story of Japan's continuing redefinition of its modern domestic and international identity.

The 1950s were indeed witness to great social and economic turmoil. from the efforts by the citizens of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to end the nuclear arms race to the unionization struggles led by coal miners demanding basic safety equipment and fair wages. – This picture of Japanese life stands in stark contrast to the middle-class family lives portrayed widely in television and motion picture melodramas today. Yet the 1950s nevertheless saw the emergence of conservative one-party rule, despite the upsurge in civic organizations and mass movements underpinned by constitutional protections for individual rights and mass politics.

By 1960, the political dissatisfactions of millions of Japanese had sparked a national movement to rescind the postwar military treaties with the United States. These dissatisfactions grew by the end of the decade into vast national movements calling for the end of Japanese support for the Vietnam War and the reversion of Okinawa from American to Japanese sovereignty. The protests targeted American government policies as much as those of the Japanese government. Not coincidentally, the United States poured resources into protecting the Japanese government from democratic demands to expel the U.S. bases and end Japan's logistical support for the war in Vietnam. Then, after these national social movements of the 1960s were squelched by extra-parliamentary and occasionally extrajudicial action, many politically active Japanese people refocused their civic engagement onto more local concerns, such as industrial pollution in Minamata, social welfare policies and resistance to state encroachment upon the rights of farmers in Narita. They were able to force the Japanese government to make significant policy changes in these areas in order to hold on to political power.

Supporters of the antiwar clause in Japan's constitution at the Global Article 9 Conference, 2008, Tokyo, ©Timothy S. George

These social movements from the late 1950s to the early 1970s defined the new outer

boundaries of democracy in Japan, shaped not by citizen apathy but by increasingly impermeable institutional barriers. Citizens were deeply involved in national political movements for the first 15 years of the postwar era, but hit several roadblocks between 1960 and 1970 that demarcated what has customarily been characterized as a decline in participatory democracy and the consolidation of one-party rule. Although leftist political movements exerted considerable influence on the shape of Japanese society, the center-right leveraged its access to corporate patronage networks and American Cold War preferences, determined to emerge as the more powerful force. The formation of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in 1955 marked the beginning of an era of conservative politics that remained the norm apart from short breaks in LDP rule in 1993-94 and 2009-12. These conservative rulers continued the pattern going back to Meiji of responding to domestic challenges just in time and just enough to remain in power.



Statues of Bakumatsu heroes Takasugi Shinsaku and Yoshida Shōin, Yamaguchi, ©Timothy S. George

The opening chapters of Japan since 1945 explore the meaning of Japan's postwar democracy at the local level. This section features essays exploring how Japan's postwar democracy translated into - or was defined by - local practice by examining the shape of civic engagement that developed in various local communities, although all were also influenced by the national politics that flowed from the capital city. By reconstructing narratives of civic life in Kamakura, a historically significant satellite of Tokyo, and several townships deep in Japan's rural periphery, Laura Hein, Timothy George, and Martin Dusenberre each examine from different angles the structures of civil society and of regional identity that emerged within the postwar constitutional order. Running against a

tide of literature that depicts postwar Japan as a nation driven by an interventionist state in league with vertically integrated corporate systems, the essays in this section reconstruct a more nuanced portrait of civic life in postwar Japan than those focused solely on the national center. George and Dusenberre also explore the boundaries of the nostalgic longing for "traditional" village Japan that accompanied the rise of the "furusato" (native place) movement in the 1990s.

Legacies of War and Occupation

If anything has been proven by the endless debates about when or whether the "postwar" has ended, it is that Japan has never escaped the long shadow of its Asia-Pacific War. The "postwar" was declared over many times, including when the Allied Occupation ended in 1952, again when the nation's GNP regained its prewar peak in 1955, when Japan's economy passed that of West Germany in 1968 to become the third largest in the world after those of the USA and the USSR, the two superpowers of the day, once again in the 1980s when Japan was the world's largest creditor and foreign aid donor and home to the world's ten largest banks, and in 1989 when the Shōwa emperor died after 63 years on the throne. Some still believe the end of the postwar has not yet arrived.

Yet, there remained ever-present reminders that the war was not buried in the past. Okinawa was occupied and administered by the United States until 1972, and large portions of it remain under U.S. military control. Beginning in the 1980s and continuing since then, former victims of Japan's invasion of the Asian continent reacted in anger when textbooks in Japan called that invasion an "advance" and Japanese politicians denied that there had been a Rape of Nanjing. Such discontent again appeared when Asia's former "comfort women," forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese government during the war, spoke out in the 1990s to demand compensation and apology. Throughout the postwar and into the twenty-first century, many Koreans and Chinese, along with their governments, repeatedly insisted



**Maritime Self Defense Force
Warships at Minamata, ©Timothy S.
George**

that Japan had never fully apologized for its actions.

Even the scenes of devastation left by the earthquake and tsunami in 2011 brought to mind for many Japanese strong public memories of the hard times that followed in the wake of surrender in 1945, as did the current emperor's decision to address the Japanese people in the immediate aftermath of the March 2011 disasters, as his father had done for the first time on August 15, 1945, 66 years earlier. The decision by the International Military Tribunal for the Far East of 1946–1948 (the "Tokyo War Crimes Trial") to blame a small number of top leaders - not including the emperor - for the war had discouraged most Japanese from considering their individual responsibility for the nation's actions. Many came to think of the war as a tragedy that had happened to them, brought on by those above. Even more so for later generations, the shadow of the war was something bequeathed to them by others and with which they simply had to live.

Even conventional periodizations of Japanese history, which tend to focus on decisive breaks in 1868, 1945, and 1952, can obscure as much as they illuminate. David Obermiller shows how Okinawa experienced a much longer and very different sort of occupation than the one that ended for the rest of the nation (except the Ogasawara Islands) in 1952, and how attention to Okinawa complicates questions of national and regional identity. The ethnographic emphasis in American views of and policies toward Okinawa had a decidedly colonial flavor. So too did American attempts to shape the ways Okinawans defined themselves and remembered their past, affecting local, mainland Japanese, and global views of the region. Similarly, Katarzyna Cwiertka describes the continuity in food shortages and distribution systems across the great divide of defeat in August 1945. By focusing on patterns of food distribution and consumption, she shows that actual practices did not always change in the wake of changes in rulers, laws, and policies. In the early years after the war citizens and occupiers alike found wartime institutions useful, albeit for new goals. The new Labor Law granted workers the basic rights denied them by the wartime state, even though it was a re-crafted version of laws and regulations drafted by mid-level bureaucrats during the war. Institutions for collectively settling workplace grievances developed by the wartime state enabled the rapid emergence of a militant and strike-ready labor movement. Furthermore, neighborhood associations used to mobilize women for Civil Defense during the war became grassroots mechanisms for campaigns by women seeking to influence national and local political issues.

In the postwar period, Japanese were no longer subjects but citizens with a much greater space for political activism. Even marginalized groups could, in theory, choose between attempting to win seats at the tables of power to make policies, or simply attempting to win recognition and compensation from "those above" (okami) in other ways. The nurses described by Sally Hastings chose the former path, organizing and electing representatives to the National Diet. She shows us the complicated interconnectedness of work, gender and occupational politics, which involved not just female nurses rebalancing their power vis-à-vis male doctors and politicians, but also contestations between nurses and midwives over notions of female professionalization. Tetsuya Fujiwara shows how the largest group of disabled veterans chose to demand formal recognition of their social and economic status as patriots who sacrificed more than the majority, but in doing so also had to contend with

some of their own, the “white gown” beggars – disabled, demobilized men begging for alms along the streets of Japan’s bombed-out cities – who threatened to undermine attempts by their better-situated disabled brothers to avoid social and economic marginalization.

State Policy for a Late-Capitalist Society

In his title for a controversial book, journalist and oft-quoted “Japan expert” Karel van Wolferen characterized the essence of Japan’s rise to global prominence as *The Enigma of Japanese Power*. He was referring to economic rather than military power. Writing at the height of Japan’s economic success in 1989, van Wolferen attempted to explain how Japan came to be the second largest economy in the world. This postwar “economic miracle” is indeed an important subject for historical study and the Japanese “success story” has been both envied and resented throughout the world. Japan’s rapid rise to global economic prominence was by far the most famous of all its postwar accomplishments, yet many scholars and pundits have, since the bursting of the economic bubble in the early 1990s, simply distanced themselves from their own earlier praise for Japan’s accomplishments and aimed harsh criticism at the state’s failure to effect economic recovery since then. They fail to explain why things changed or whether the problems today are the result of actions taken earlier. There is, of course, an important back story to this narrative, one that was neglected during the decades of economic growth.

Pundits and scholars often assert that national economic policy was the secret of Japan’s postwar economic success, particularly Prime Minister Ikeda Hayato’s 1960 income-doubling policy. Less often did they emphasize the extent to which that policy was a cooptive response to the strong showing by labor in the social protest movements of the 1950s. Unprecedented economic growth enabled managers to refrain from mass layoffs even when individual firms were losing money. Their companies demanded an ever greater commitment of cheerful labor from workers in return, in a grand bargain that rested on full (male) employment. Indeed, Japan’s unemployment rate remained well below 3 percent until the late 1980s.

The rapid economic growth from the 1950s to the early 1970s dramatically increased the standard of living of most Japanese households. By the end of the 1960s, the three Cs – car, “cooler” (air conditioner), and color television – were the longed-for icons of Japan’s new material wealth. By the mid-1970s, most blue- and white-collar families had, or would soon have, cars, color TVs, and air conditioners. And by then, the majority of Japanese considered themselves to be middle class. By the height of the economic boom of the 1980s, middle-class affluence took on a level of mass opulence unparalleled in modern history. But even at the height of the bubble years of the 1980s, it was becoming clear that Japanese affluence was built on unsustainable social, economic, and environmental models. Nor did everyone delight in the frenetic pace at which many Japanese sought to consume the trappings of extravagances theretofore unaffordable, of which Gucci and Louis Vuitton handbags were emblematic.

The economic bubble burst in 1991. Housing prices plummeted and suicide rates skyrocketed. Along with the increasingly bleak economic outlook came cultural and social issues that included the re-emergence of teenage prostitution (*enjo kōsai*, or compensated dating), along with increasing rates of unemployment and homelessness, all of which had been ubiquitous in prewar and Occupation-era Japan. Japan’s long nineties, also known as the lost decade, stretched well into the twenty-first century. In 2002, the official national unemployment rate exceeded 5 percent for the first time since the early 1950s. When disaggregated, the data revealed a more troubling concern: the average unemployment rate for persons aged 15-24 was double that for the overall population. All through the decade preceding the 2011 Tōhoku Earthquake, aggregate wages continued to decline, the ratio of part-time temporary to full-time regular workers rose, and the prospects for young adults remained grim, because the employment system favored those who already had jobs.

Many Japanese wondered if the system that had brought so much success was breaking



A homeless camp in the shadow of Tokyo's city hall, ©Timothy S. George

down, or perhaps was no longer appropriate for a post-Cold War, post-high growth era in which Japan no longer had clear models from which to learn. Were the system and the bureaucrats, politicians, and business leaders who ran it incapable of adapting to a changed world? Young people, in particular, feared that the system and the social bargains that had enabled it were now closing off rather than creating opportunities for them. Critics blamed the state for having failed to develop either viable welfare strategies for the aging population or adequate employment for the nation's youth, but at the same time, numerous pundits and politicians insisted that it was the filial duty of these "lazy" young people to buckle down and work harder.

Three of our authors focus directly on the ways that state policy initiatives toward industry, fisheries, and finance effected considerable changes to the relationship between the postwar state and producers, not always for the better. Essays by Lonny Carlile, Bruce Aronson and Satsuki Takahashi reconstruct policy initiatives of the postwar and post-bubble eras to examine how the state has addressed some of Japan's most pressing policy problems. Carlile and Aronson focus specifically on policies centered in Tokyo that, with varying degrees of success, attempted to address the interconnected milieu of pressing urban economic and social problems. Looking to rural Japan, Takahashi paints a portrait of fisheries policies that illustrates quite plainly the persistence of Japan's historical rural/urban divide. All three essays suggest that the precedents of bubble-era policies continue to shape the relationship between state and society in the wake of the 2011 Tōhoku Earthquake.

Looking Out, Looking Back

The high speed growth years were culturally transformative, although the ghost of the war was never fully banished, especially when Japanese interacted with people beyond their national boundaries. Christine Yano's essay takes us back to a time when the sky was the limit, when most people believed that the world was about to become Japan's oyster. Showing the way into the joys of global travel, leisure, and cosmopolitanism were Japanese stewardesses for Pan Am, who traveled abroad even before the relaxation of currency restrictions in 1964 allowed other Japanese to follow. America became a different sort of model, offering glamorous employment and freedom for young women and lessons in the consumption of leisure travel and media for a generation who had not known the war, or who seemed to have forgotten it. Christopher Gerteis' chapter reminds us, however, that the past was not always so easily left behind. The NYK shipping line's redefinition of itself at the moment when Japan left the twentieth century and entered the twenty-first included new "corporate social responsibility" practices that involved reframing public presentation of its past. Its attempt to focus only on the

supposed glitter, cosmopolitanism, and good relations with Asia up through the interwar years, and, even more improbably, to paint itself as a passive victim of the Pacific War, only served to demonstrate the difficulty of escaping the shadow of the war.



Subaru 360 manufactured from 1958 to 1971, ©Timothy S. George

Hiraku Shimoda's analysis of the *Project X* television series argues that even domestically there were dangers inherent in the nostalgia for the golden age of Japan's "greatest generation," the everymen (rarely are women foregrounded) who sacrificed and struggled to create the products on which growth and affluence were built. In the "good old days" of high growth, the *Project X* series asserts, when "death from overwork" (*karōshi*) was not yet a legally recognized cause of death, inventiveness, nose-to-the-grindstone determination, production, and consumption gave Japan its purpose and identity.

The implicit message of the television show was that Japan needed to re-adopt these values, but imagined golden ages of the past can never be recovered. The sages of old, be they the Duke of Zhou put forward as a model by Confucius, or the inventors of Cup Noodles or the Walkman celebrated by *Project X*, cannot show Japanese how to solve the unprecedented problems of our late capitalist era. Even after the many crises that swept Japan in the wake of the Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami, some still seemed to think that it would be possible to turn back the clock or simply stay the course. Most disturbingly such true believers included not only the nuclear power industry, but also members of both the Liberal Democratic Party and the Democratic Party of Japan.

Other Japanese people responded to the disaster by striking out in new directions. Among them was the richest man in Japan, Son Masayoshi, the Korean-Japanese entrepreneur and CEO of the SoftBank mobile phone company, who pushed for a massive solar power network to replace Japan's dependence on nuclear power. Another was Mikitani Hiroshi, CEO of the internet company Rakuten, who advocated a thoroughgoing internationalization of Japanese corporate culture. Whether these or other ideas could bring back Japan's optimism, and again make it a global model, remained to be seen.

Contextualizing the Study of Postwar Japan

Japan's more than two decades of economic troubles look very much like an early example of the sort of economic predicament in which almost all the advanced economies of North America and Europe found themselves less than a decade into the twenty-first century, suggesting that there is much to be learned from the mistakes of the first postindustrial society. Moreover, despite everything, Japan still features one of the highest standards of living in the world, reminding us that it provides positive examples in crucial ways.⁵ In short, far more than is acknowledged, Japan's situation resembles that of most highly industrialized nations of Europe and the Americas in both good and bad ways. Some of the most important social, economic, and political problems they share are high youth unemployment, aging populations, industrial decline, financial crises, environmental degradation, and even natural disasters. The worry by so many about whether or not Japan matters seems motivated by a fear that the standard of living enjoyed by most Japanese since the 1960s is about to disappear. It was created by turning Japan into the world's industrial base but this state of affairs is now over. The Japanese experience of de-industrialization, shared with other countries with high standards of living, is taken by many to indicate that the inevitable result is the end of affluence for all of us. Japan is now an exemplar of how postindustrial societies cope.



Tsunami awareness in Kamakura,
©Timothy S. George

Japan has not coped well with its recent crisis. The handling of the disasters of March 2011 was deeply shocking specifically because it was bungled so badly despite the fact that Japan has one of the world's best-educated populations and is a functional democracy, and both the national government and private companies can mobilize vast economic resources. Yet none of these significant strengths either prevented the disaster or led to an adequate response. While Japan's response to March 2011 perhaps topped that of the American government in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, it seemed reasonable to expect that a nation built upon a web of earthquake faults would have been better prepared for the disasters that befell the Fukushima nuclear power plant and beyond.

Fukushima destroyed the image of Japan as technologically capable when it needs to be, both at home and abroad.

The recent Tokyo gubernatorial election raises doubts about the meaningfulness of political change in the wake of the Fukushima nuclear disaster. In February 2014 pro-nuclear candidate Masuzoe Yōichi won the governorship of Tokyo over a field of candidates, including a former prime minister who opposed restoring the nation's reliance on nuclear power. Perhaps even more disconcerting are Masuzoe's public views that women are unsuitable for government leadership roles, which further underscores the extent to which he is another of the "old boys" who just doesn't get it. Yet, the Tokyo Olympics in 2020 could still provide Japan's political elites with the opportunity to demonstrate a vision for the future, as did their predecessors in 1964 when the Olympic Games were used to demonstrate to the world that Japan had reformed, recovered, rebuilt, and rejoined the club of industrialized nations. It remains doubtful, however, that the Japanese will achieve by 2020 as broad a consensus on national goals as was perceived in 1964.

The triple disasters of March 2011 have been described as a break with the past. The contributors to Japan since 1945 do not attempt to predict how those disasters will change Japan or the ways its history is already being told. But we are certain that, whatever directions Japanese take now - and they will most certainly not all take the same direction - they will be building on their pasts, particularly their experiences, accomplishments, and failures, as all societies always do.



Obon lanterns bearing the names of tsunami victims, Kesenuma,
©Timothy S. George

These new approaches encourage all of us to take fresh looks at how the Japanese - and outsiders - have understood their postwar paths. There are no simple answers to the question of when or whether the postwar period has ended, or what the decisive turning points since 1945 have been. But these questions matter because Japan's future, built on the precedents of its past, will still have much to teach us, good and bad, about life in the twenty-first century. The proof is in the pudding, or rather how we approach the pudding: by attacking difficult questions from a multiplicity of angles, this new wave of scholars may even contribute to the debates - still in their infancy - about whether the disasters of 11 March 2011 constituted a decisive turning

point in postwar Japanese and global history.

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Notes

¹ Updated and Adapted from "Revisiting the History of Postwar Japan," in Christopher Gerteis and Timothy S. George, eds., [*Japan since 1945: From Postwar to Post-bubble*](#) (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013).

² Katsuki Aoki, "Whither Japanese keiretsu? The transformation of vertical keiretsu in Toyota, Nissan and Honda 1991–2011," *Asia Pacific Business Review*, 19: 1, 70–84; Richard Katz, *Japan, the System That Soured: The Rise and Fall of the Japanese Economic Miracle*. Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1998; "Keeping Japan on the Map: A One-Day Conference in Celebration of the Sasakawa Lectureship Programme and the Breadth of Japanese Studies in the UK Today" held at Birkbeck College, University of London, 18 November 2011.

³ Jeff Kingston, "Abe's Nuclear Energy Policy and Japan's Future," *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol. 11, Issue 34, No. 1, August 19, 2013; and Cai Hong, "Over Japan's past, Abe should ditch ambiguity for reconciliation," *China Daily*, 18 July 2013. Available [here](#) at ChinaPost. Accessed 21 July 2013.

⁴ The question of the total numbers of people killed during the Asia-Pacific War (1931–1945) is still very controversial, although estimates range between 15 and 20 million. For a sobering discussion of this issue, see John Dower's epilogue "From War to Peace" in John W. Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 293–317.

⁵ "[Turning Japanese: Debt and Politics in America and Europe](#)," *The Economist*, 30 July 2011. Accessed 21 January 2013.