

UZU

Monthly
Review

Be The Center Of The Whirlpool



Every Word You Say, Every Move You Make

Earthquakes, Elephants, and Employment

Dressing Like You Mean It

Who the Hell is Tomoko Namba?

Inside the Whirlpool With Pablo Riveros

Seeing For The First Time, Again

Now Read This! The Only Gaijin In The Village

The Often Misunderstood Difference

Between What Branding Is Vs What A Brand Is

Riding the Kuroshio with Yaskawa Electric

The Older Sibling is Losing the Room

The Real Reason American Cars Flopped in Japan

Japanese Business Etiquette 101

Business Japanese For People In A Rush

They Came, They Spent, They Left



MAY 2025

ISSUE NUMBER 10

THIS ISSUE



	FROM THE EDITOR	03
EVERY WORD YOU SAY, EVERY MOVE YOU MAKE		04
	DRESSING LIKE YOU MEAN IT	10
THE OFTEN MISUNDERSTOOD DIFFERENCE		17
BETWEEN WHAT BRANDING IS VS WHAT A BRAND IS		
	INSIDE THE WHIRLPOOL WITH PABLO RIVEROS	21
RIDING THE KUROSHIO with YASKAWA ELECTRIC		29
	SEEING FOR THE FIRST TIME, AGAIN	35
	WHO THE HELL IS TOMOKO NAMBA?	41
EARTHQUAKES, ELEPHANTS, AND EMPLOYMENT		47
	THEY CAME, THEY SPENT, THEY LEFT	55
THE REAL REASON AMERICAN CARS FLOPPED IN		61
	JAPAN	
NOW READ THIS! THE ONLY GAIJIN IN THE VILLAGE		68
	THE OLDER SIBLING IS LOSING THE ROOM	73
	JAPANESE BUSINESS ETIQUETTE 101	79
BUSINESS JAPANESE FOR PEOPLE IN A RUSH		83



FROM THE EDITOR



Paul Ashton
Founder
ULPA

Welcome to UZU Issue Number 10, and welcome to May, the month where Japan exhales. Golden Week is done, the sakura are gone, and we begin that long, slow drift toward the rainy season. It's a strange time, neither start nor finish, when energy dips, umbrellas multiply, and plans get tested for staying power.

We open with *Every Word You Say, Every Move You Make*, where I explore what it really means to build brand trust in Japan. In a market that rewards consistency over novelty, every detail becomes a signal. Brands here aren't judged by volume, but by repetition, restraint, and the quiet accumulation of credibility.

Gordon McLean returns with *The Often Misunderstood Difference Between What Branding Is vs What a Brand Is*, a crisp breakdown of the gap between identity and execution. It's a back-to-basics reminder for anyone who's ever mistaken a logo refresh for strategy.

Our "Inside the Whirlpool" feature spotlights Pablo Riveros, founder of Manabu Hubs in Fukuoka, whose work helping foreign entrepreneurs build inside Japan's complex system is a masterclass in patience, precision, and purpose-driven growth.

Riding the Kuroshio traces the evolution of Yaskawa Electric from coal-country motors to cognitive robotics. Over a century later, they're still shaping the machinery behind Japan's motion, quietly, precisely, and with zero need for reinvention theatre.

In They Came, They Spent, They Left, I take a closer look at the gap between tourist footfall and real economic impact. Japan's visitor numbers may be breaking records, but what sticks after the flights leave?

Who the Hell is Tomoko Namba? profiles the DeNA founder whose moves across gaming, baseball, and corporate politics have redefined what leadership can look like—not just for women, but for anyone who refuses to coast.

And we close with *The Older Sibling is Losing the Room*, a meditation on Japan's shifting perception of America. Admiration hasn't vanished—but the gravitational pull is fading. What replaces it may be quieter, but no less consequential.

Thanks for reading UZU. Here's to rainy days, long reflections, and progress that doesn't need to shout. As ever, let's keep the whirlpool turning.



Image: Getty Images

EVERY WORD YOU SAY, EVERY MOVE YOU MAKE

BY PAUL ASHTON



I was six when Every Breath You Take came out. Too young to understand that it was, technically, a song about a man obsessively stalking his ex. My sister, who was seventeen and fully immersed in the theatre of adolescence, didn't care. She'd blast it from her bedroom stereo, dancing barefoot on the carpet, singing into a hairbrush like it was the most romantic thing ever written. I'd sit nearby, watching, half admiring, half confused, soaking in every word she mimed with absolute conviction: every word you say, every move you make, I'll be watching you.

It's funny looking back, because, of course, now we all know it's a deeply flawed song with a message that hasn't exactly aged well. But as a kid, what I took from it wasn't the obsessive undertone. It was the sense that people notice things. Small things. The things you do when you think no one's paying attention. And in that way, Sting might've accidentally written the anthem for branding in Japan.

Because as a brand in Japan, every word you say, every move you make, every colour you show, every detail you overlook, it's all being watched. Quietly, often silently. Not to pounce or critique, but to register. To remember. To decide whether you're worth trusting. Here, brands aren't performing for attention. They're proving themselves, inch by inch, moment by moment, across hundreds of tiny, deliberate interactions.

Distinctive brand assets or 'DBAs', those logos, sounds, characters, colours, packaging choices, and tones of voice that help people instantly recognise and remember a brand, are not just helpful here. They're essential. In Japan, they



“STING MIGHT’VE ACCIDENTALLY WRITTEN THE ANTHEM FOR BRANDING IN JAPAN.”





don't serve the purpose of standing out. They serve the purpose of staying consistent. Of being known. Of building something long-term in a country that prizes reliability over flair.

Western marketers love disruption. Japan prefers precision. Where some markets reward the bold reinvention of a brand identity every few years, Japanese consumers find comfort in familiarity. The most successful brands here understand that DBAs aren't updated to keep up with trends. They're reinforced to deepen recognition, to earn trust through the slow accrual of emotional continuity.

Logos, for example, function less like visual signatures and more like reputational anchors. They signal steadiness. MUJI doesn't deviate. Toyota doesn't drift. These aren't brands that need to shout. They have already spoken, and their repeated visual and verbal presence does the rest. The same goes for colour palettes. A Kirin beer can looks like a Kirin beer can, even from across the room, even if you don't drink beer. The consistency is not decorative. It is strategic.

But it goes deeper than that. In Japan, distinctive brand assets are not only visual. They're behavioural. The soft politeness of a customer service script. The restrained confidence of a website's copy. The sense of purpose embedded in a brand's mission. These are all signals, and they matter. Because what defines a brand here isn't what it says once. It's how it behaves every time.

“THE MOST SUCCESSFUL BRANDS HERE UNDERSTAND THAT DBAS AREN'T UPDATED TO KEEP UP WITH TRENDS.”



This is especially critical in a country where consumer loyalty is deep and often enduring, but not easily given. Once earned, Japanese brand loyalty can last generations. But the threshold is high. Quality is assumed, not marketed. Design is expected to be thoughtful. Tone must be balanced. Loudness is not power. Precision is.

That's why characters and mascots work so effectively here. They make brands familiar without making them obnoxious. They collapse emotional distance. But they only work when integrated deeply into the brand's identity. Not as gimmicks. As memory devices. Think of Nintendo's Mario, or the regional mascots that represent prefectures, utilities, even airports. They stick not just because they're cute, but because they're consistent. They show up. They don't get reinvented every fiscal quarter.

Foreign brands entering Japan often misunderstand this. They assume their global assets are universal. But cultural context changes everything. A logo that reads as modern elsewhere might feel cold or out of sync in Japan. A jingle that's catchy in the US might feel invasive here. A packaging format that screams luxury in France might register as wasteful or gaudy.

Kleenex got this right. Instead of importing its American packaging with its blocky branding and visual bulk, it adopted the soft design codes of Japanese tissue products, subtle colours, floating patterns, and visual lightness. It didn't trumpet its foreignness. It adapted. And in doing so, it managed to compete in a category where foreignness is often a liability.



“A LOGO THAT READS AS MODERN ELSEWHERE MIGHT FEEL COLD OR OUT OF SYNC IN JAPAN.”



Because in Japan, domestic is king. The word kokusan, ‘domestically produced’, is the strongest trust signal in almost every consumer category. Not even French cheese or Swiss chocolate is immune. If a product can be made in Japan, it should be. And if you’re not from here, your branding must work overtime to earn its place. That doesn’t mean all foreignness is bad. Some associations, French elegance, German reliability, still hold. But they must be used with care. Kneipp, the German bath product brand, leans into its roots not with Alpine imagery but with a medicinal aesthetic that matches Japanese expectations. In Germany, its branding is soft and mindful. In Japan, it’s scientific and functional. Both work, but only because they’re tuned to the right cultural register.

Even more telling is the case of Danone’s Greek yoghurt. In Europe or the US, the packaging might lean into Hellenic imagery, columns, blue domes, and Mediterranean diet callouts. But in Japan, none of that exists. The logo is clean, the font neutral, and the messaging focused on protein. Greekness isn’t the selling point. Function is.

This is what Japan teaches us about DBAs: they aren’t static icons, and they aren’t meant to travel unchanged. They’re context-sensitive, meaning-rich assets that must be designed and deployed with surgical precision. When they’re right, they don’t just identify a brand. They make it inevitable. And they must be used again and again. Until your team is sick of them. Until they become invisible to you, but unforgettable to everyone else. This is not a market that rewards novelty for novelty’s sake. It rewards brands that know themselves and show themselves, steadily, patiently, clearly. That’s when DBAs become what Warren Buffett once called an “economic moat”, the thing that protects your brand when everything else changes



“SOME ASSOCIATIONS, FRENCH ELEGANCE, GERMAN RELIABILITY, STILL HOLD. BUT THEY MUST BE USED WITH CARE.”





The paradox, of course, is that all this effort makes it look effortless. The packaging just feels right. The logo just makes sense. The ad's voice just fits. That's the magic of DBAs done well. They don't interrupt. They integrate. They don't demand attention. They earn familiarity.

And so I find myself thinking about that Sting song more often than I should. It wasn't a love song, not really. But it was about presence. About watching. About how repetition becomes memory. Every word you say, every move you make...

It stuck with me, not because I understood it, but because I lived it. In the background of my childhood, in those small moments, watching my sister mime every line like it meant something. It became familiar not through meaning, but through exposure.

And that's exactly how brand memory builds in Japan. Quietly. Repetitively. Without big declarations. Consumers don't chase novelty. They register consistency. They pay attention without announcing it. They wait for things to feel true. That's the real power of distinctive brand assets here. When deployed with precision, they don't just signal identity, they accrue trust. They become the emotional shorthand for everything a brand has proven itself to be.

Turns out, I wasn't just watching my big sis. I was learning how attention works, how recognition is earned. How, in the quiet, everything counts.

"THAT'S EXACTLY HOW BRAND MEMORY BUILDS IN JAPAN. QUIETLY. REPETITIVELY. WITHOUT BIG DECLARATIONS."





Image: Unknown

DRESSING LIKE YOU MEAN IT

BY PAUL ASHTON



Tokyo isn't just a fashion capital, it's a contradiction wrapped in silk and vinyl. A place where you'll find a teenager in Lolita lace sipping a matcha latte across from a businessman in a meticulously pressed three-piece suit, both with equal attention to detail, both curated like museum exhibits. It's a city that wears its past and its future at the same time, folding tradition into innovation like an origami crane built from laser-cut neoprene. And maybe that's precisely why it unsettles people, why, when you mention Tokyo in the same breath as Paris or Milan, there's a flicker of confusion. To some, Tokyo doesn't conform to the rules of a fashion capital. It rewrites them.

In the West, fashion has always been a signifier of status, a language of class, aspiration and rebellion. Tokyo adds a fourth dialect: devotion. Clothes are not just worn, they are practiced. They are crafted into statements so precise, so intricate, they verge on the ceremonial. Where in London someone might wear vintage denim to signal a lack of pretension, in Tokyo that same denim has been hand-selected for the wear on the hem, the angle of the fray, the shade of the fade. That's the thing, nothing in Tokyo fashion is accidental.

Much of this precision stems from Japan's historic relationship with garments as cultural carriers. The kimono, for example, is less a piece of clothing and more a philosophy stitched into fabric. With no seams or darts in the Western sense, it respects the integrity of the material. It's a garment about flow, not form; about presence, not spectacle. Even today, when worn mostly on special occasions, its essence seeps into the construction of contemporary Japanese design: the reverence for structure, the understanding of negative space, the choreography of dressing.

"THE KIMONO IS LESS A PIECE OF CLOTHING AND MORE A PHILOSOPHY STITCHED INTO FABRIC."



Japanese fashion doesn't only look forward, it loops. In the Meiji era, when Japan opened itself to the West after centuries of isolation, the cultural flood included fashion. But instead of being washed away, Japanese aesthetics absorbed the incoming wave, hybridising Western suits with native silhouettes. School uniforms took on Victorian flourishes. Officewear grew from military lines. Silk remained sacred, but it was cut with Parisian angles. The point is: Japan's fashion history is not a straight line, but a series of reflective folds. At every intersection with foreign influence, there is an internal reimagining, never a surrender.

It's no surprise, then, that Tokyo was the launchpad for some of the most revolutionary designers of the twentieth century. The 1980s saw Rei Kawakubo, Yohji Yamamoto and Issey Miyake storm Paris Fashion Week, dismantling every expectation of what fashion could be. These weren't just clothes, they were challenges. Kawakubo's shredded, asymmetrical silhouettes were anti-glamour incarnate, disturbing the idea that women's clothes had to flatter. Yamamoto's use of black, his monastic, draped garments, felt like sartorial philosophy. Miyake, with his origami-inspired "Pleats Please" and A-POC innovations, pushed the boundaries of technology and sustainability decades ahead of schedule.

They didn't so much break the rules as render them irrelevant. And in doing so, they didn't just influence Japanese fashion, they reshaped global fashion from the inside out. Their designs forced the West to ask what beauty could look like when stripped of symmetry, body-conformity and seasonal fads. The movement became a kind of aesthetic manifesto: one where imperfection (wabi-sabi), transience, and negative space held more meaning than glamour or excess.



"WHEN JAPAN OPENED ITSELF TO THE WEST AFTER CENTURIES OF ISOLATION, THE CULTURAL FLOOD INCLUDED FASHION."



But Tokyo's fashion magic doesn't live on the runway alone. It thrives in the streets, especially in Harajuku, the neighbourhood that became synonymous with youth rebellion and high-concept self-styling. Harajuku isn't a trend, it's a laboratory. In the 1990s and early 2000s, Shoichi Aoki's FRUiTS magazine documented the spontaneous genius of teenagers who fused Victorian ruffles with punk badges, anime references with vintage Americana, all in one outfit. Their creations weren't costumes; they were identities worn on the outside, curated daily, never repeated, always evolving.

What makes Tokyo's street fashion unique is that it is bottom-up, not top-down. Brands follow the streets here, not the other way around. This is the opposite of New York or Paris, where fashion week dictates the direction of retail and street style. In Tokyo, the subcultures themselves, decora, mori girl, visual kei, genderless kei, generate new aesthetics that may or may not ever be monetised. They exist first as acts of self-expression, art installations lived in.

Then there's Ura-Harajuku, the backstreets, the place where Japanese streetwear matured into a global movement. This was the domain of BAPE's Nigo, Jun Takahashi of Undercover, and Shinsuke Takizawa of Neighborhood. Their blend of Tokyo grit, Western counterculture and Japanese precision created a streetwear aesthetic that would echo across the globe. Without Tokyo, there is no Supreme, no Off-White, no Kanye West sneaker empire. Tokyo didn't just influence streetwear. It invented the rules of how it could be done.



“WHAT MAKES TOKYO'S STREET FASHION UNIQUE IS THAT IT IS BOTTOM-UP, NOT TOP-DOWN.”





It's not just about vision, it's about place. Tokyo is a geography of style. Each district carries its own philosophy. Shibuya is youthful and hyper-trendy, where looks are updated weekly. Ginza is sleek and luxurious, old money in quiet silk. Shimokitazawa is the indie haven, vintage, handmade, and anti-brand. Koenji leans punk, thrifting as religion. Daikanyama and Nakameguro are minimal, architectural, and often androgynous. Ikebukuro is playful and otaku-coded, where cosplay blurs into everyday wear. No other city has such a topographic diversity of fashion language within a single train map.

And yet, Tokyo doesn't market itself loudly. It never needed to. Unlike Milan or Paris, it doesn't rely on prestige or history alone. It relies on consistency. The daily commitment to style, down to the angle of a bag, the condition of your shoes, the way your mask matches your outfit, creates an atmosphere of quiet reverence. That tidiness, that discipline, might be mistaken for formality. But it's something deeper. It's respect. For the garment. For the body. For the ritual.

Even in the world of fast fashion, Japan refuses to let things fall apart. UNIQLO is perhaps the perfect emblem of this. A brand whose ethos is the perfection of basics. No flashy logos, no runway drama. Just the art of the understated. Clothes that fit, wear well, and never shout. And yet, their Heattech, their ultralight down, their collaborations with everyone from Jil Sander to Takashi Murakami, all point to a quiet revolution: making excellence accessible.

“THAT TIDINESS, THAT DISCIPLINE, MIGHT BE MISTAKEN FOR FORMALITY. BUT IT’S SOMETHING DEEPER.”



Tokyo fashion also challenges the body itself. It doesn't ask people to conform to shapes; it reimagines clothes that move with the human form, not against it. Androgyny isn't a trend here, it's been standard since the 1980s. Genderless fashion, pioneered by designers like Tanaka Daisuke, continues to grow because Tokyo never bought into binary aesthetics to begin with. What is feminine or masculine when your entire outfit is made from recycled pleats or asymmetrical wool that could belong to anyone?

To the Western eye, this can all feel overwhelming. The masks, the layering, the rules that aren't written down but are obeyed all the same. Some see costume, or artifice. But that reading misunderstands Tokyo entirely. The city's fashion is not about peacocking, it's about care. An elegant grandmother's vintage kimono, a teenage boy's thrifted Gosha Rubchinskiy jacket, a corporate worker's perfectly steamed blazer, they're all acts of attentiveness. Attention to detail is not vanity here. It's self-respect.

What makes Tokyo a fashion capital is not its glamour or celebrity or even its brands. It's its philosophy. A belief that clothing is an extension of selfhood, that how you dress is a form of social harmony, aesthetic inquiry and even spiritual consideration. In a world obsessed with digital avatars, Tokyo insists on the body, in its imperfections, its rituals, its daily choices. And it does so without fanfare.



“THE CITY'S FASHION IS NOT ABOUT PEACOCKING, IT'S ABOUT CARE.”



Global designers, from McQueen to Prada, have all borrowed from this well. Japonisme is more than a trend. It's an enduring gravitational pull. But what they borrow are fragments: a silhouette here, a print there, a nod to wabi-sabi in an otherwise Western collection. What Tokyo gives to those who live within it is something fuller: a lifestyle of aesthetic attention.

To walk through Tokyo is to experience fashion as an ecosystem, not a showcase. It's a conversation happening across time, gender, age, and intention. A place where even the most casual outfit has been considered, and even the most elaborate one worn like second skin. It's not performative. It's lived.

That's what makes Tokyo a true fashion capital. Not the hype. Not the brands. The quiet, daily devotion to dressing as a form of meaning. In a world fast losing its textures, Tokyo is a city that still feels made by hand.



“TO WALK THROUGH TOKYO IS TO EXPERIENCE FASHION AS AN ECOSYSTEM, NOT A SHOWCASE.”





Image: FEARNOTRUTH

THE OFTEN MISUNDERSTOOD DIFFERENCE BETWEEN WHAT BRANDING IS VS WHAT A BRAND IS

BY GORDON MCLEAN



The terms “brand” and “branding” are often used interchangeably. However, they represent distinct concepts that play different roles in shaping a company’s identity and perception in the market. Understanding the difference between a brand and branding is essential for businesses seeking to build a strong and impactful presence.

At its core, a brand is much more than just a logo, a tagline, or a visual identity. A brand encompasses the overall perception and reputation of a company, product, or service in the minds of consumers. It is the sum total perception of everything a company sells, says and does. A brand essentially represents the intangible qualities and values that differentiate it from its competitors and establish a unique identity in the market.

A strong brand is built on a foundation of trust, credibility, and authenticity. It resonates with its target audience, evokes positive emotions, and creates a sense of connection and loyalty. A brand embodies the promises and expectations that customers associate with a company, such as quality, reliability, innovation, and customer service. It is the personality and essence of a company that customers perceive and interact with at every touchpoint; each one being both valuable or vulnerable, and an opportunity to either build or diminish the brand’s equity.



“A BRAND ENCOMPASSES THE OVERALL PERCEPTION AND REPUTATION OF A COMPANY, PRODUCT, OR SERVICE IN THE MINDS OF CONSUMERS.”





On the other hand, branding refers to the strategic activities and efforts undertaken by a company to shape and influence the perception of its brand in the market. It is the process of creating, developing, and managing the various elements that contribute to the overall brand experience. Branding encompasses the tangible and intangible elements that communicate and reinforce the brand's values, positioning, and messaging.

Branding involves several key components, including visual identity, messaging, brand positioning, and customer experience. Visual identity includes the design elements such as logos, color schemes, typography, and imagery that create a consistent and recognizable brand presence. Messaging involves crafting compelling and consistent brand stories, taglines, and value propositions that communicate the brand's essence and value to the target audience. Brand positioning is the strategic process of identifying and establishing a unique and differentiated position in the market relative to competitors. Lastly, customer experience refers to the interactions and touchpoints that customers have with the brand throughout their journey, including product quality, customer service, packaging, and marketing communications.

“BRANDING INVOLVES SEVERAL KEY COMPONENTS, INCLUDING VISUAL IDENTITY, MESSAGING, BRAND POSITIONING, AND CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE.”



Effective branding ensures that a company's desired brand image and values are effectively communicated and experienced by its target audience. It helps to create awareness, generate positive associations, and build a strong emotional connection with customers. Through branding, a company can differentiate itself from competitors, build brand equity, and foster customer loyalty and advocacy.

To illustrate the difference between a brand and branding, let's consider an example. Nike is a well-known brand recognized worldwide. The Nike brand represents values such as athleticism, performance, and inspiration. When customers think of Nike, they associate it with high-quality sports apparel, cutting-edge technology, and a commitment to empowering athletes. This perception of Nike as a brand is the result of successful branding efforts. Nike's visual identity, including the iconic "swoosh" logo, the "Just Do It" tagline, and the association with successful athletes, are all elements of its branding strategy. Moreover, Nike's emphasis on product innovation, captivating marketing campaigns, and sponsorship of sports events all contribute to shaping the overall brand experience and reinforcing its brand values.

In short, while the terms "brand" and "branding" are often used interchangeably, they represent distinct concepts. A brand is the sum total perception of everything a company sells, says and does, encompassing the emotions, associations, and experiences that consumers have with it. On the other hand, branding refers to the strategic activities and efforts undertaken by a company to shape and influence their market's perception of their brand.



Gordon McLean
Founder
Fear No Truth
www.fearnotruth.com

Gordon is the Founder of Fear No Truth, a partner company of Ulpa.

In his career he has launched, built and reinvented some of the world's best brands; including Apple, Bacardi, Bank of Scotland, Bing, Bombay Sapphire, EA Games, GE, Gillette, Grey Goose, Guinness, Halifax, Hilton, Holiday Inn Express, HSBC, Perfect Day, Radisson, Sandy Hook Promise, SAP, ServiceNow, Vodafone, and Wells Fargo.

He has a body of work that's been recognised for its commercial impact by the IPA and Effies, for its strategic thinking by the Jay Chiats and ARF, for its cultural impact by the MoMA, Emmys and TED, and for its creative excellence by The Clios, One Show, Cannes Lions, D&AD, and others.

"THROUGH BRANDING, A COMPANY CAN DIFFERENTIATE ITSELF FROM COMPETITORS, BUILD BRAND EQUITY, AND FOSTER CUSTOMER LOYALTY AND ADVOCACY."





Image: UZU

INSIDE THE WHIRLPOOL with PABLO RIVEROS





The first came across Pablo Riveros during my time at NordVPN. I was on the hunt for fresh affiliate marketing partners in Japan, right when the digital nomad visa buzz was starting to build. That search led me to Manabu Hubs, the tech incubator Pablo runs out in Fukuoka. But it wasn't just the venture that stood out, it was Pablo himself. His work spanned continents, languages, and industries. He wasn't just building something interesting in Japan, he was building differently.

So, when I started UZU and launched the "Inside the Whirlpool" interview series, Pablo was one of the first people I reached out to. His schedule at the time? Chaos. Think: three countries, multiple programs launching, and a calendar with zero breathing room. That first invitation quickly became a polite raincheck.

Founders, as I've learned the hard way, aren't like Pokémon, you can't "catch 'em all."

But I'm glad I waited. Because when Pablo did find a sliver of time, he gave us something worth holding out for: an open, honest, and deeply insightful conversation about building in Japan, what the journey has taught him, and the road ahead.

I hope you enjoy this one as much as I did.

"FOUNDERS, AREN'T LIKE POKÉMON, YOU CAN'T 'CATCH 'EM ALL.'"



What inspired you to start your business in Japan?

My journey began as a Senior Tech Lead in Australia, working at the University of Queensland. Though I had a stable career, I craved the fast-paced evolution of tech and innovation. A seminar at Kyushu University brought me to Fukuoka, then the pandemic hit, and I stayed, pivoting into consulting and later launching an edtech startup. When that struggled post-pandemic, we shifted to GreenTech, using AI to help businesses cut energy costs, landing a major project in Taiwan.

But the real spark for Manabu Hubs came from the Fukuoka Startup Collective, a Facebook/LinkedIn group I created to connect foreign founders. Unexpectedly, it grew rapidly, many reached out for help navigating Japan's business landscape. I realized: foreign founders needed support from someone who'd faced their same challenges.

So, we built Manabu Hubs as a tech incubator and soft-landing platform, offering mentorship, networking, and resources, from demo days to investor connections. What started as a small online community is now a global ecosystem, helping startups expand into Japan and beyond.

At its core, Manabu Hubs is by founders, for founders, bridging the gap foreign entrepreneurs face in Japan.

How does Japan's business culture shape your approach?

Running a startup in Japan has taught me invaluable lessons especially about patience, precision, and partnership. In Japan, business moves differently. You won't always get quick responses or the agile mindset common in Western startups. Early on, I hired a Japanese team, but their focus on perfection over speed clashed with startup urgency. Yet, I admired their attention to detail and excellence, something I've learned to balance with



“FOREIGN FOUNDERS NEEDED SUPPORT FROM SOMEONE WHO'D FACED THEIR SAME CHALLENGES.”





adaptability. The solution? A blended team. By integrating foreign and Japanese talent, we combine agility with meticulousness, helping each other grow. Another key lesson: Your business "face" in Japan must be local. As a foreign founder, navigating deals or government projects alone is tough. That's why I partner with trusted Japanese collaborators, they bridge cultural gaps and ensure mutual trust. Success here hinges on collectivism and win-win relationships. Adaptability isn't optional, it's survival.

What was a key moment that helped you succeed in Japan?

To be honest, I don't consider myself "successful" yet, I see this as a long-term journey. In Japan, the business culture doesn't reward speed or quick wins; it's about steady growth, trust, and relationships. I've learned to celebrate small milestones, because here, progress is measured in years, not months.

A defining moment was connecting with the right people in Fukuoka those who opened doors, introduced me to key partners, and believed in my vision. Now, I pay it forward by advising other founders through Manabu Hubs, especially bootstrapped entrepreneurs like myself. Many of us are in this for the marathon, not the sprint. (And as a long-distance runner, I know exactly what that means putting in the hours, step by step.)

My advice? Prepare for the long run, build genuine relationships, and embrace Japan's pace. Success here isn't a finish line, it's the resilience to keep moving forward.

“THE BUSINESS CULTURE DOESN'T REWARD SPEED OR QUICK WINS; IT'S ABOUT STEADY GROWTH, TRUST, AND RELATIONSHIPS.”



How do you build strong relationships with clients and partners here?

In Japan, business relationships are built on trust, humility, and genuine connection, not titles, wealth, or flashy achievements. Here's what I've learned:

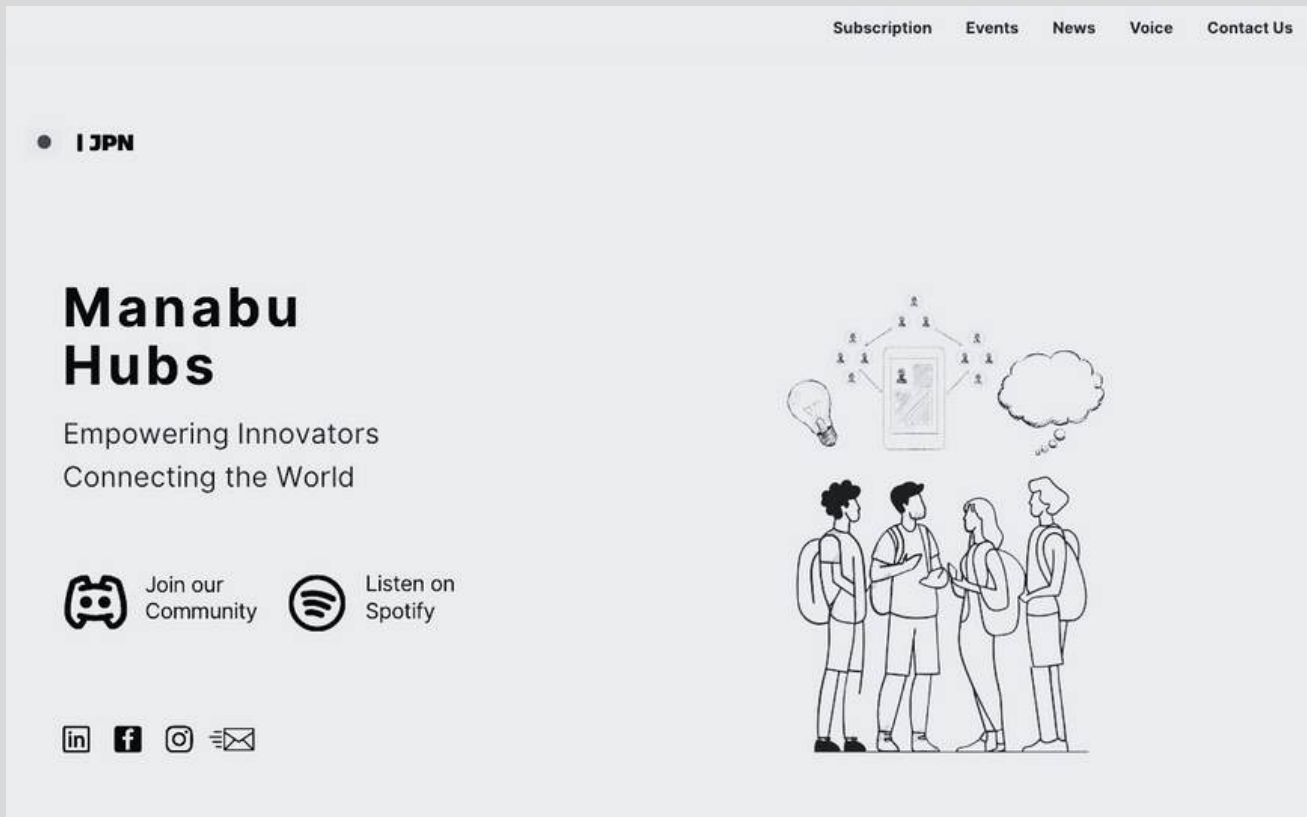
1. Show respect, not status: Japanese clients care more about who you are than what you've accomplished. Be humble, listen deeply, and invest time in learning their language and customs, it signals commitment.
2. Give before you ask: For two years, I collaborated on small projects without expecting returns. That patience built trust, and those partners later became my strongest allies. In Japan, generosity opens doors.
3. Connect beyond business: Shared passions, like football or soccer, running, or wine, matter as much as meetings. My closest clients are people I've bonded with outside work. Relationships here thrive on authenticity.

The secret? Be someone they want to work with, not just for.



**“BUSINESS RELATIONSHIPS ARE BUILT ON TRUST, HUMILITY,
AND GENUINE CONNECTION.”**





How do you handle Japan's regulatory requirements?

It requires patience and respect. While Japan's regulatory processes may seem bureaucratic or slow-moving from a Western perspective - with multiple steps and less digitization than some might expect - I've learned to appreciate that this system has supported businesses here for decades, even centuries. Many Japanese companies have operated successfully for 50+ years under these same frameworks.

The key is to:

1. Approach regulations with understanding rather than frustration
2. Work with local experts - we partner with Japanese professionals who help navigate requirements
3. Respect the process while advocating for gradual modernization

For our tech startup, having trusted local partners has been essential in balancing compliance with innovation. It's about working within the system while thoughtfully pushing for progress where possible.

What role does innovation play in your strategy?

As founders, we need to innovate always, from pivoting our startups as Edtech to be recognised as an important startup ecosystem player in Japan, we evolve permanently, not just how we present our solutions, and assist global founders but also the way we adopt new strategies.

“APPROACH REGULATIONS WITH UNDERSTANDING RATHER THAN FRUSTRATION.”





Can you share a marketing tactic that worked well in Japan?

One of the most effective tactics we used in Japan was actively presenting our services, solutions, or products at various networking events. These gatherings provided valuable opportunities to meet local professionals, build trust, and explore collaborations with Japanese partners. Establishing credibility through face-to-face interactions proved essential in fostering long-term relationships. We also focused on forming partnerships with companies that shared our vision and could support mutual growth. In addition to offline engagement, we launched a newsletter that has been steadily growing in subscribers and reach. Complementing this, we used social media platforms like Instagram to share content and updates, helping to increase visibility and engage with our wider community.

What skills are crucial for success in Japan?

I believe one of the most important skills for succeeding in Japan is patience. Things often take time to develop here; whether it's building business relationships, navigating bureaucracy, or integrating into the local market. But if you stay patient and consistent, opportunities will gradually come your way. Patience also helps in understanding cultural nuances and earning trust, which is crucial in the Japanese business environment.

Additionally, while speaking Japanese is undeniably a huge advantage especially for communication and building rapport; what truly drives success is your ability to genuinely connect with people. Showing respect, being a good listener, and making an effort to understand others can open more doors than language skills alone. It's about building meaningful relationships and showing that you're committed for the long term.

“ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT SKILLS FOR SUCCEEDING IN JAPAN IS PATIENCE.”



How do you balance respecting tradition with introducing new ideas?

Respecting traditions and understanding the local culture is absolutely essential when trying to connect with Japanese people, in my case in both personal and professional contexts. Demonstrating cultural sensitivity shows not only that you value their way of life but also that you're willing to invest in a respectful, long-term relationship. This kind of attitude builds trust, which is the foundation of doing business in Japan.

Once that trust is established, it often opens the door to more meaningful exchanges of ideas. You may find that your fresh perspective or external experience is welcomed, especially when it's shared in a way that complements rather than overrides local practices. When approached with humility and collaboration, this combination of cultural respect and global insight can lead to strong partnerships and real business transformation.

What one piece of advice would you give to newcomers entering Japan?

Finding reliable local partners and taking the time to understand how the system works in Japan is absolutely vital for long-term success. Equally important is aligning your goals with those of your partners and the broader community. Success in Japan often comes from shared purpose when your business objectives also reflect a positive impact on society or the local ecosystem. Whether it's through sustainable practices, supporting local talent, or contributing to community development, having a mission that goes beyond profit can resonate strongly in the Japanese market. This alignment builds deeper trust and creates long-lasting partnerships that go far beyond transactional relationships.



Are you a founder or CEO in Japan? [Get in touch](#) and be featured in the next edition of Inside The Whirlpool! [Say Hello!](#)

Pablo Riveros
Founder
Manabu Hubs
<https://manabuhubs.com/>

“SUCCESS IN JAPAN OFTEN COMES FROM SHARED PURPOSE”





Image: UZU

RIDING THE KUROSHIO with YASKAWA ELECTRIC

BY PAUL ASHTON





The story of Japan's industrial ascent is filled with bright lights and famous names, the brands that shaped homes and highways around the world. Sony, Toyota, Honda, each a household name, each a symbol of postwar reinvention. But alongside those titans, working in quieter, deeper ways, are companies like Yaskawa Electric: less known to consumers, more fundamental to the machine of modern industry. If Sony sold dreams and Toyota mobility, then Yaskawa sold motion itself, or rather, the ability to control it with a level of precision that helped Japan rise not just as a maker of goods, but as the maker of how things are made.

The company was founded in 1915 by Daigorou Yasukawa in Kitakyushu's coal country, a region that powered Japan's industrialisation. Yasukawa was no idle tinkerer; born into a family deeply embedded in mining and energy, and educated in electrical engineering at the Imperial University of Tokyo, Daigorou had apprenticed with giants like Hitachi and Westinghouse before striking out on his own. He was a builder, not just of products, but of a vision of Japan's future: electrified, efficient, independent.

That ambition materialised early. In 1917, Yaskawa delivered its first product, a three-phase induction motor, to coal companies running hoisting machinery. These weren't glamorous machines, but they were vital, and in post-Meiji Japan, supplying domestic alternatives to imported equipment was a quiet revolution. Over the next two decades, Yaskawa's motors powered more than coal shafts, they became part of Japan's manufacturing backbone. By 1935, the company had delivered a 4,000-horsepower synchronous motor to the Yahata steelworks. Japan was rearming, retooling, and Yaskawa's motors were humming in the background.

“IF SONY SOLD DREAMS AND TOYOTA MOBILITY, THEN YASKAWA SOLD MOTION ITSELF.”





After the devastation of World War II, Yaskawa was among the first Japanese firms to re-engage with international markets, securing export contracts as early as 1948. This re-emergence was more than economic, it was symbolic. Japan was returning to the world stage not with weapons, but with technology.

In the postwar years, Yaskawa turned inward, refining its engineering. In 1950, it released the VS Motor, a variable-speed unit that could be remotely controlled, ideal for complex machinery like printing presses. Eight years later, it invented the Minertia motor, which responded a hundred times faster than its predecessors. These weren't marginal gains. The Minertia motor redefined servo control. The foundation was laid for what Yaskawa would become.

But it wasn't until the 1960s that Yaskawa crystallised its identity, not just as a motor company, but as the quiet architect of industrial motion. In 1969, one of its engineers, Tetsuro Mori, coined a new word to describe the fusion of mechanics and electronics: "mechatronics." The word was trademarked in 1972, but more importantly, it became a philosophy. Today, "mechatronics" is standard engineering vocabulary. At the time, it was a conceptual leap.

Mechatronics defined Yaskawa's next era. The company wasn't merely selling parts, it was designing systems. The 1960s saw the creation of the first "MOTO fingers" and "MOTO arms," early robotic components that hinted at a future of automated assembly. Even more prescient was its push for unmanned factories.

"JAPAN WAS RETURNING TO THE WORLD STAGE NOT WITH WEAPONS, BUT WITH TECHNOLOGY."





While Silicon Valley today sells the dream of lights-out manufacturing, Yaskawa was sketching out those principles half a century ago, combining sensors (detectors), controllers and actuators to create autonomous production cells.

In 1977, it all came together with the launch of the MOTOMAN-L10, Japan's first fully electric industrial robot. It wasn't just a machine, it was a milestone. Fully articulated, driven by servos, and deeply programmable, the L10 launched a lineage of industrial robots that would become the arms and hands of Japan's, and later, the world's, manufacturing systems. Today, the Motoman series performs welding, packaging, coating, cutting and assembly tasks in every corner of the industrial world.

Yaskawa could have stopped there. Many companies do, satisfied with a signature invention. But the company's instincts leaned long-term. In the 1980s and 90s, it continued refining its AC drives, launching the Sigma series of compact servo systems in 1992, built for miniaturisation, speed and reliability. It wasn't building robots for spectacle; it was building components for systems that had to work flawlessly, day in and day out, often behind the scenes.

By the 2000s, Yaskawa had developed the Mechatrolink communication protocol, a way for motion controllers to talk to peripheral devices seamlessly. This mattered in increasingly complex production environments. In 2009, it unveiled the QMET motor drive system for hybrid vehicles, again demonstrating that its core technology could evolve with changing industries.

“IT WASN'T BUILDING ROBOTS FOR SPECTACLE; IT WAS BUILDING COMPONENTS FOR SYSTEMS THAT HAD TO WORK FLAWLESSLY”





Still, Yaskawa wasn't chasing trends. It was absorbing them, integrating new ideas with a consistency of vision. It didn't need to be first to every new platform. It needed to make the platform work better.

The 2010s were transformative. The company launched its i³-Mechatronics concept in 2017, seeking to combine integrated (hardware), intelligent (software) and innovative (data-driven) layers into a single production ecosystem. It wasn't a marketing line. Yaskawa built a Solution Factory to physically embody the concept, demonstrating real-world applications of predictive maintenance, digital twins, and analytics-informed production. In a moment where "smart factory" had become a buzzword, Yaskawa offered substance.

Its leadership, notably President Hiroshi Ogasawara, has remained grounded in what makes the company resilient: not just innovation, but disciplined innovation. Under his stewardship, Yaskawa reinforced employee training, opening technical schools and revamping internal systems to value balance, flexibility and individual growth. For a company so devoted to machines, it has never forgotten the role of people, not just in using its products, but in building them.

Today, Yaskawa operates in over 29 countries, with production bases in 12. It is investing in food and agricultural automation, renewable energy systems, rehabilitation robotics, and even next-generation collaborative robots. It's not just supplying the tools of industry anymore, it's helping redefine what industry is.

"FOR A COMPANY SO DEVOTED TO MACHINES, IT HAS NEVER FORGOTTEN THE ROLE OF PEOPLE."



Its rehabilitation robotics, such as the CoCoroe series and the ReWalk exoskeleton, reflect a rare corporate empathy: that automation need not just replace human labour, but augment human ability. This ethos is also reflected in the “Humatronics” initiative, applying robotics not to replace, but to support human functions. It’s mechatronics reimagined for care, not just for profit.

What makes Yaskawa truly fascinating is not that it has survived over a hundred years, many Japanese companies can claim similar longevity, but that it has remained relevant without reinvention theatre. It did not need to become a lifestyle brand. It chose instead to become indispensable. Not disruptive, but foundational.

Its legacy is etched not in consumer goods, but in the motion behind everything from electric vehicles to cleanrooms to hospital corridors. If you’ve eaten a perfectly packaged convenience store bento in Tokyo, or driven a Japanese hybrid car, or walked through a hospital with automated systems humming behind the walls, you’ve experienced Yaskawa’s influence, invisibly, reliably, precisely.

And that might be the most Japanese legacy of all. While others chased attention, Yaskawa chased utility. In doing so, it helped power an entire nation’s journey from coal hoists to cognitive robotics.

One hundred years ago, Daigorou Yasukawa believed Japan needed to master the means of motion to become truly independent. Today, that motion is global, digital and increasingly intelligent. And Yaskawa is still, as it always has been, one step ahead of the curve.



“WHAT MAKES YASKAWA TRULY FASCINATING IS NOT THAT IT HAS SURVIVED OVER A HUNDRED YEARS.”





Image: Alphabet

SEEING FOR THE FIRST TIME, AGAIN

BY PAUL ASHTON



When Google Glass was announced more than a decade ago, it arrived dressed in novelty and weighed down by ambition. It was futuristic in a way that made people squint, both at the design and the implications. Here was a device that perched on your face, whispered into your ear, and recorded the world with unsettling ease. It was clever, but it wasn't quiet. It made people uncomfortable, and a world where privacy is sacred and attention is monetised, discomfort tends to be a death knell. Glass never found its voice.

But in 2025, something has shifted. Google Glass (or something near to it), is back, but this time, it listens. At TED this spring, Google unveiled a series of live demonstrations that were, in the moment, technically dazzling. But beneath the demos, something quieter happened, a reframing. This wasn't a celebration of engineering. It was a meditation on presence. The glasses didn't just respond to voice commands. They observed. They remembered. They helped, in a way that felt like something closer to thoughtfulness than automation. A book was identified by title. A hotel key was found, not by scanning a database, but by remembering a passing glance. A diagram was interpreted. A record sleeve turned into music. A sign into a translation. All without friction.

And then there was Gemini, the engine behind it all, speaking gently with the fluency of a human, but never pretending to be one. It offered poems, summaries, maps, encouragement. It didn't ask for control. It asked for context. And as it spoke, it did something rare in the world of smart devices: it gave the impression that it understood when to be quiet. That, in many ways, is the deepest sign of technological maturity. The future isn't loud. It's ambient.

“THIS WASN'T A CELEBRATION OF ENGINEERING. IT WAS A MEDITATION ON PRESENCE.”





At Google I/O in 2024, Project Astra laid the groundwork for the TED talk a year later. That demo, switching between a phone camera and prototype glasses, introduced us to the idea of an AI assistant that could reason visually, understand code, recognise landmarks, and hold memory across time. But it wasn't the capability that stood out. It was the tone. The user wasn't issuing commands. They were having a conversation. Astra was, in the most literal sense, paying attention.

If all of this sounds vaguely familiar, perhaps it's because Japan imagined it first.

For decades, Japanese culture has entertained and embraced the idea that machines might one day live beside us, not as replacements, but as companions. In Japanese fiction, robots rarely rebel. They help. They cook, clean, solve crimes, make friends. Even in everyday life, devices in Japan don't hide their personalities. Elevators greet you. Toilets warm your seat. Vending machines cheer you on. The culture has never drawn a hard line between the artificial and the emotional. In Shinto belief, even objects can have spirits. A well-made broom, a kettle, a doll, these can carry memory. So why not glasses?

This cultural fluidity, this willingness to project kindness into the mechanical, is what may make Japan not just a receptive audience for Google's new vision, but a natural home for it.

"IN JAPANESE FICTION, ROBOTS RARELY REBEL. THEY HELP. THEY COOK, CLEAN, SOLVE CRIMES, MAKE FRIENDS."



Because in Japan, a pair of smart glasses that quietly remind you of what you forgot, help you cross linguistic boundaries, and offer you a way to understand your surroundings without breaking eye contact with the world, such a thing would not be seen as invasive. It would be seen as considerate. In the language of omotenashi, the uniquely Japanese philosophy of service, the highest form of help is the help that doesn't need to be asked for. Help that notices. That remembers. That offers without imposing.

Gemini, as it is embodied in these new glasses, feels like a digital expression of omotenashi. It anticipates. It interprets. It holds space.

And Japan has more than cultural resonance to bring to this moment. It has urgency. With an ageing population and labour shortages tightening across industries, assistive technologies are not luxuries; they're lifelines. Glasses that help seniors navigate the city, recall daily routines, or communicate more fluidly with caregivers could extend independence and reduce strain. In manufacturing, where Japan still leads with surgical precision, an overlay of real-time guidance through AR could become a natural extension of craft. In education, these tools could support inclusion for students with disabilities or help international students bridge language gaps in real-time.



“WITH AN AGEING POPULATION AND LABOUR SHORTAGES TIGHTENING ACROSS INDUSTRIES, ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGIES ARE NOT LUXURIES; THEY’RE LIFELINES.”



Tourism, too, stands to be transformed. Japan continues to draw millions of visitors from around the world, many of whom still fumble with translations, etiquette, and signage. A discreet guide, a pair of glasses that does not draw attention, but offers it, could provide a level of cultural respect and ease that the smartphone never quite managed.

Yet even in this hopeful vision, Japan's relationship with technology remains as paradoxical as ever. It is both intimate and wary. Tech is loved, but not always trusted. Surveillance is tolerated, but only if it's polite. Always-on microphones and cameras will need to prove their restraint. Transparency isn't a technical feature here. It's a social one. Gemini will need to understand that just because it can speak, doesn't mean it should. AIs that succeed in Japan must be adaptable, deferential, and linguistically gentle. Formalities matter. Silence matters.

Which is why what Google has done, perhaps unknowingly, is something quite rare. It hasn't just reimagined Glass. It has redesigned the interface between human and machine to be less about control, and more about conversation. Less about attention, more about presence. It's not the interface of 2013. It's something softer, almost invisible. In its best moments, it feels less like a gadget and more like a sense, like memory, but external. Like intuition, but shareable.



“AI THAT SUCCEEDS IN JAPAN MUST BE ADAPTABLE, DEFERENTIAL, AND LINGUISTICALLY GENTLE. FORMALITIES MATTER. SILENCE MATTERS.”





And in Japan, this feels less like innovation and more like return. A return to the idea that machines can hold care. That technology, when designed with humility, can feel less like an interruption and more like a companion. Not to take over our lives, but to be in them, respectfully, helpfully, quietly. The way a shoji door slides open with no sound. The way a ryokan staff member appears just before you realise you're cold. The way a machine, worn on your face, remembers your keycard before you realise you've lost it.

We've spent the last ten years trying to make technology smarter. But maybe intelligence was never the finish line. Maybe what we were waiting for was a kind of presence, the kind that doesn't interrupt, doesn't demand, doesn't announce itself.

In this version of the future, the machine doesn't compete for your attention. It gives it back to you. It remembers what you forgot, sees what you missed, speaks only when needed. It doesn't try to become human, just quietly, respectfully, becomes part of the world you already live in.

“MAYBE INTELLIGENCE WAS NEVER THE FINISH LINE.”





Image: X

WHO THE HELL IS TOMOKO NAMBA?

BY PAUL ASHTON



When Tomoko Namba stepped onto the startup scene in Tokyo in 1999, she arrived without an office, without a team, and without capital. What she did have was a gut feeling, and perhaps something even rarer in Japan at the time: the audacity to leap. This was not Silicon Valley, where risk was romanticised and failure seen as a badge of honour. This was Japan, a society steeped in lifetime employment and a corporate culture that rewarded seniority more than it did originality. A woman in her late thirties leaving McKinsey to found an internet startup? It bordered on madness.

Yet, DeNA, the company she founded, would go on to become one of Japan's most influential internet firms, starting in online auctions, shifting into mobile gaming, branching out into e-commerce, even acquiring a professional baseball team. But to understand Tomoko Namba is not to tally business units or market capitalisations; it's to trace the trajectory of a woman who, again and again, has chosen to pivot at the exact moment stability beckoned.

Her journey is not a smooth arc of success. In fact, one of the most revealing moments from her past interviews is when she describes, almost joyfully, the mess of it all. "The path to success doesn't look like a straight line," she told a room full of entrepreneurs at Slush Tokyo. "It's full of mistakes. Every mistake you can think of, I made it." In an entrepreneurial culture still learning to celebrate vulnerability, Namba's candour about failure is both disarming and revolutionary.



"THE PATH TO SUCCESS DOESN'T LOOK LIKE A STRAIGHT LINE."





Back in 1999, the goal was simple: to build Japan's top online auction site. But an infamous systems development failure meant DeNA launched last, not first. "We promised profitability within a year," she recalls, "but we stayed deep in the red for four." Her original ambition, to outpace Yahoo Japan's auction business, was dwarfed when they discovered their rival was thirty times larger. The early DeNA was, by every conventional metric, a failure. Yet it didn't vanish.

Why? In her own words, it was the people. She repeats this like a mantra in interviews. The secret wasn't code or capital, but talent, particularly the discipline to never compromise on the quality of hires. Namba insisted her early team members find someone better than themselves. If they couldn't? One partner recruited his own brother, arguing at least he shared the same DNA. There's a dry humour to that anecdote, but it hides a deeper insight: she understood culture as a generative force, not a by-product. The first ten hires, she says, determine the DNA of a company, pun entirely intended.

It's not just that she sought talent, it's how doggedly she pursued it. In one case, she spent three hours a day for a week convincing a star from a commercial bank to join DeNA. The candidate was sold; his mother was not. She came to DeNA's front door, got on her knees, and begged Namba to rescind the offer. Namba didn't yield. She printed out every flattering article about DeNA she could

"THE SECRET WASN'T CODE OR CAPITAL, BUT TALENT, PARTICULARLY THE DISCIPLINE TO NEVER COMPROMISE ON THE QUALITY OF HIRES."



find, made a booklet, and gave it to the woman. It's a scene that could be played for laughs, but it reveals something profound about the cultural terrain she was navigating. In Japan, a son's career is still often a family affair, and being the matriarch of a startup meant being persuasive not just in the boardroom, but in someone's living room.

Despite these early struggles, DeNA did something most Japanese startups couldn't: it scaled. By 2006, Mobage, its mobile gaming platform, had millions of users and a model built on virtual goods, digital swords, clothing, seeds, that Japanese consumers bought with real money. In 2010, Namba led a \$400 million acquisition of ngmoco, a U.S.-based mobile game platform, planting a Japanese flag in Silicon Valley soil. At the time, few Japanese tech firms dared to look abroad. She wasn't just thinking globally, she was doing it.

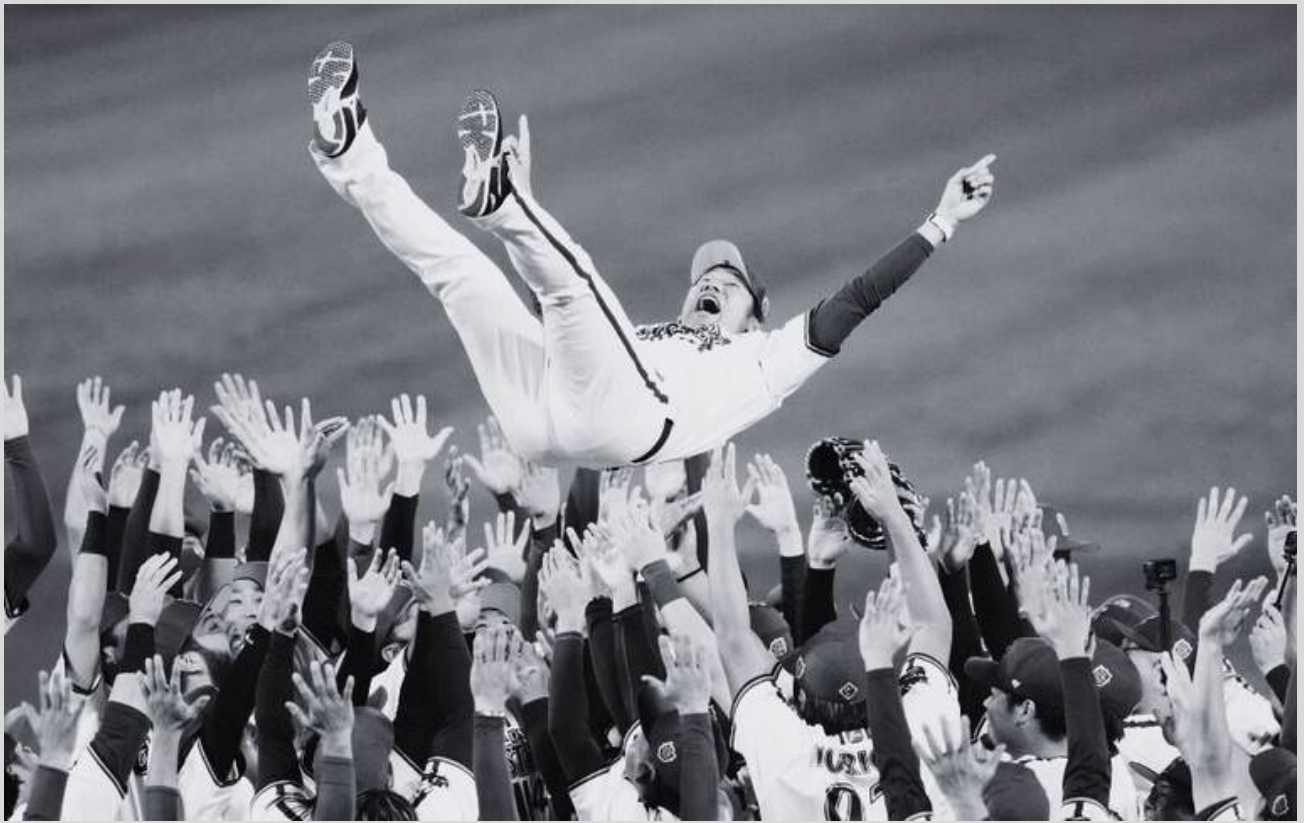
But the most significant pivot in Namba's life came in 2011, not from market pressure or technological change, but from personal need. Her husband, also a business executive, was battling cancer. Namba stepped down as CEO to care for him. She did not sugar-coat this decision as a sabbatical or a leadership restructure. She left because she needed to be there for someone she loved. In a country where CEOs routinely sleep at their desks and where work-life balance is often a punchline, this choice was nothing short of radical.

What's striking is how little drama she assigns to this act. She speaks of it plainly, with the same clarity she brings to business strategy. Leadership, to Namba, is not just about what you do at the top, it's how you behave when power is something you choose to set down. She stayed on as chairperson, but her day-to-day involvement waned. She walked away, not in defeat, but in strength.



“DeNA DID SOMETHING MOST JAPANESE STARTUPS COULDN'T: IT SCALED.”





Her return to public life didn't involve a triumphant startup launch or a flashy investment fund. Instead, it was something both unexpected and emblematic of her spirit: baseball. In 2015, DeNA took ownership of the Yokohama BayStars, and Namba became the first female owner of a Japanese professional team. Baseball is to Japan what football is to Europe, ritualised, patriarchal, resistant to change. That she not only entered this domain but earned respect within it speaks volumes about her credibility.

She didn't stop there. In 2021, she became the first female vice-chair of Keidanren, Japan's powerful business federation. Keidanren is not known for its radicalism. It is the ultimate insider's club. To be invited to lead within it, especially as a woman, especially as someone from tech, signals a shifting tide. It's as if Japan's corporate establishment finally acknowledged that the future it had resisted was now being helmed by people like her.

And yet, Namba seems uninterested in symbolic victories. She has repeatedly said she does not enjoy talking at women's empowerment panels. She doesn't want to be known as a "female entrepreneur." She is simply an entrepreneur. Her impact is felt not in slogans but in systems. She believes the best way to advocate for women in business is not through visibility, but through action, through proving it can be done.

"NAMBA SEEMS UNINTERESTED IN SYMBOLIC VICTORIES. SHE HAS REPEATEDLY SAID SHE DOES NOT ENJOY TALKING AT WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT PANELS."



If there is a philosophy that binds her career, it might be her desire to “stay young forever.” She has said this in multiple forums, not as a cosmetic aspiration, but as a guiding principle. For her, youth is not about age, it’s about energy. Curiosity. Agility. The willingness to rebuild, even when you’ve already built something great. That’s why she continues to invest in startups. That’s why she builds internal incubators within DeNA. That’s why she embraces AI not as a threat, but as a creative partner.

In one of her most recent talks, Namba described DeNA’s future as a “second founding,” with a goal of launching multiple unicorns through small, nimble teams of ten. It’s a return to the garage phase, not a retreat but a deliberate regression, an effort to reawaken the chaos that breeds invention. She talks about AI with the same giddy anticipation that she once reserved for the mobile web. At 63, she is planning like a 23-year-old, betting everything on what’s next, not what was.

And maybe that’s her most radical quality of all. In a culture that prizes seniority and reveres endings, she insists on new beginnings. Again and again. Always beginning. Always building.



“SHE TALKS ABOUT AI WITH THE SAME GIDDY ANTICIPATION THAT SHE ONCE RESERVED FOR THE MOBILE WEB.”





Image: PETER MENZEL/SCIENCE PHOTO LIBRARY

EARTHQUAKES, ELEPHANTS, AND EMPLOYMENT

BY PAUL ASHTON



On a morning drive through Japan's rural hinterlands, it's not unusual to cruise along a flawlessly maintained road with no other vehicle in sight. The surface glints like it's been laid that week. The signage is crisp, the guardrails aligned with military discipline. Further along, in a coastal village, a towering concrete seawall slices off the sea from view. It's not beautiful, but it's meant to be comforting. And in Tokyo, far beneath the metropolis, you might find yourself inside the Metropolitan Area Outer Underground Discharge Channel, G-Cans, for short, a subterranean cathedral designed to drain floodwaters away from the capital's arterial lifelines. All of it is impressive. All of it is expensive. And none of it is accidental.

Japan is always building. The process is almost meditative. It builds to heal, to protect, to employ, and, sometimes, to be seen. Infrastructure in Japan is not just a functional system, it is a physical manifestation of the national psyche. In a country wracked by natural disasters, hemmed in by mountains and sea, and steadily shrinking in population, construction has become something of an operating philosophy. It is politics. It is policy. And increasingly, it is ritual.

That building fervour is far from declining. The Japan construction market was valued at over USD 609 billion in 2024, projected to grow to USD 716 billion by 2029. For a country grappling with deflation, demographic decline, and a sluggish consumer economy, this is striking. Construction still contributes roughly 5.5% of Japan's GDP. And behind that figure is a deeper story, one written in fault lines, budget lines, and lifelines.



“JAPAN IS ALWAYS BUILDING. THE PROCESS IS ALMOST MEDITATIVE.”





The most visceral layer of this story is seismic. Japan is the most earthquake-prone nation on Earth, cradled awkwardly atop four tectonic plates. Earthquakes aren't just possibilities, they're inevitabilities. Typhoons sweep through each summer. Tsunamis arrive not as freak acts but as anticipated consequences. Living here is, in part, a negotiation with geology. And so Japan builds accordingly.

After the devastation of the 1995 Kobe earthquake, seismic codes were overhauled. In 2011, the Great East Japan Earthquake prompted another round of soul-searching and regulation. New standards emphasised not only strength but flexibility. Buildings had to absorb shock, sway without cracking, and survive multiple hits. Yet even with this resilience, there's a limit. A structure might survive, but not without internal fractures, loosened joints, or critical aesthetic scarring. The policy and insurance logic in Japan favours total replacement over repair. A building that can no longer be trusted to protect life is quickly marked for demolition. As a result, Japan is one of the only rich countries where it's considered entirely normal for a house to be torn down after 30 years.

What's remarkable is that this isn't seen as a failure. It's accepted, even embraced. Cultural notions of impermanence, shaped by Buddhist and Shinto beliefs, blend with pragmatic modern risk management. The Ise Grand Shrine, Japan's most sacred Shinto site, has been ritually dismantled and rebuilt every 20 years for over a millennium. That spiritual rhythm echoes through urban planning decisions, large and small. So while many countries debate how to retrofit and conserve old buildings, Japan often just starts again.

“THE POLICY AND INSURANCE LOGIC IN JAPAN FAVOURS TOTAL REPLACEMENT OVER REPAIR.”



This logic now extends into broader urban development. In Tokyo, a wave of so-called “once-in-a-century” redevelopment projects has swept through Toranomon, Ikebukuro, Shinagawa and Shibuya. These are not just vanity upgrades; they’re driven by seismic anxiety, urban densification, and economic recalibration. The towers are designed to be quake-proof, energy-efficient, and smart. Some integrate AI-powered systems for lighting, climate, and security. But beneath the sustainability branding is a familiar truth: new buildings mean more building.

Still, seismic logic can only explain so much. Scratch the polished surface of Japan’s construction state and you find elephants, not literal ones, but vast, underused infrastructure projects. Japan’s so-called white elephants are a legacy of its postwar political bargain: rural loyalty secured through concrete. From the Asa Coast Railway’s dual-mode bus-train trundling through depopulated Tokushima, to Odate–Noshiro Airport in Akita, which welcomes just three planes a day despite its capacity for wide-body jets, these are monuments to subsidy more than necessity.

For decades, the LDP maintained power by funnelling public works into regions that reliably delivered votes. Local governments learned to frame projects as revitalisation, no matter how thin the economic rationale. And because rural districts remain overrepresented in parliament, the incentives endure. These projects rarely deliver on their promises, but once planned, they are almost never cancelled. Concrete flows whether it’s needed or not.



“JAPAN’S SO-CALLED WHITE ELEPHANTS ARE A LEGACY OF ITS POSTWAR POLITICAL BARGAIN: RURAL LOYALTY SECURED THROUGH CONCRETE.”





What makes this dynamic unique is how quietly accepted it is. In other democracies, white elephants spark outrage or scandal. In Japan, they are often viewed with quiet pragmatism, a form of visible care from a distant state. The result is infrastructure that outlasts its purpose, built less for the present and more for the idea of stability itself.

Beneath these megaprojects is an employment engine that rarely gets acknowledged outside Japan. As of 2023, over 3.3 million people work in construction, about 1 in 10 workers. Many of them are in their late 50s or 60s, part of a cohort who came of age during Japan's postwar building boom and never left the sector. For rural men without degrees or urban connections, construction remains one of the few stable paths to a decent living. This is not just economic, it's emotional. Construction offers identity, continuity, and routine. The industry may be physically grueling, but it is socially sustaining.

Yet the sector is showing its age, literally. Labour shortages are mounting, and productivity remains low by international standards. One in four skilled workers is now over 60. The government has begun introducing automation and robotics, and firms are experimenting with remote-operated cranes and AI-enhanced project management. The hope is that digital transformation can fill the gap through technologies like Building Information Modelling. But the cultural inertia runs deep. Many local firms still operate with paper records, and skills are transmitted face-to-face, not through training platforms or virtual models.

“FOR RURAL MEN WITHOUT DEGREES OR URBAN CONNECTIONS, CONSTRUCTION REMAINS ONE OF THE FEW STABLE PATHS TO A DECENT LIVING.”





Reform also butts up against entrenched interests. Japan's construction industry is governed not just by laws, but by associations, many of them arcane, but influential. The Thixotropic Grout Association, for example, sets the standards for specialised concrete mixes used in tunnels and dams. The Japan Concrete Institute helps write the playbook for testing protocols and material tolerances. These organisations shape policy indirectly, often acting as quasi-regulators. Government ministries routinely defer to their guidance when certifying materials or awarding contracts. The effect is a self-reinforcing ecosystem in which standards are high, but change is glacial.

And then there's the housing paradox. Despite its reputation for compact urbanism, Japan has more vacant homes than any major economy, over 8.4 million, or 13.8% of its housing stock. Some are rural relics left behind by ageing or deceased owners. But many are in suburbs, recently built yet already abandoned. The cause isn't just demographics. Japan's housing market is calibrated for replacement, not preservation. New builds receive tax advantages. Renovations are expensive and sometimes legally complex. And because older homes aren't considered earthquake-safe by newer standards, they're treated as liabilities.

Yet cracks are forming in this logic. In the first half of 2023, home renovation orders exceeded ¥1.5 trillion, a sign that younger generations, priced out of gleaming condo towers, are turning to second-hand homes. The Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism is now promoting renovations through grants and zoning reforms. The private sector is catching on, too. Developers are marketing retrofitted homes with smart tech and energy-efficient appliances. Still, these efforts coexist awkwardly with the enduring preference for the new. Reuse is becoming trendier, but replacement remains default.

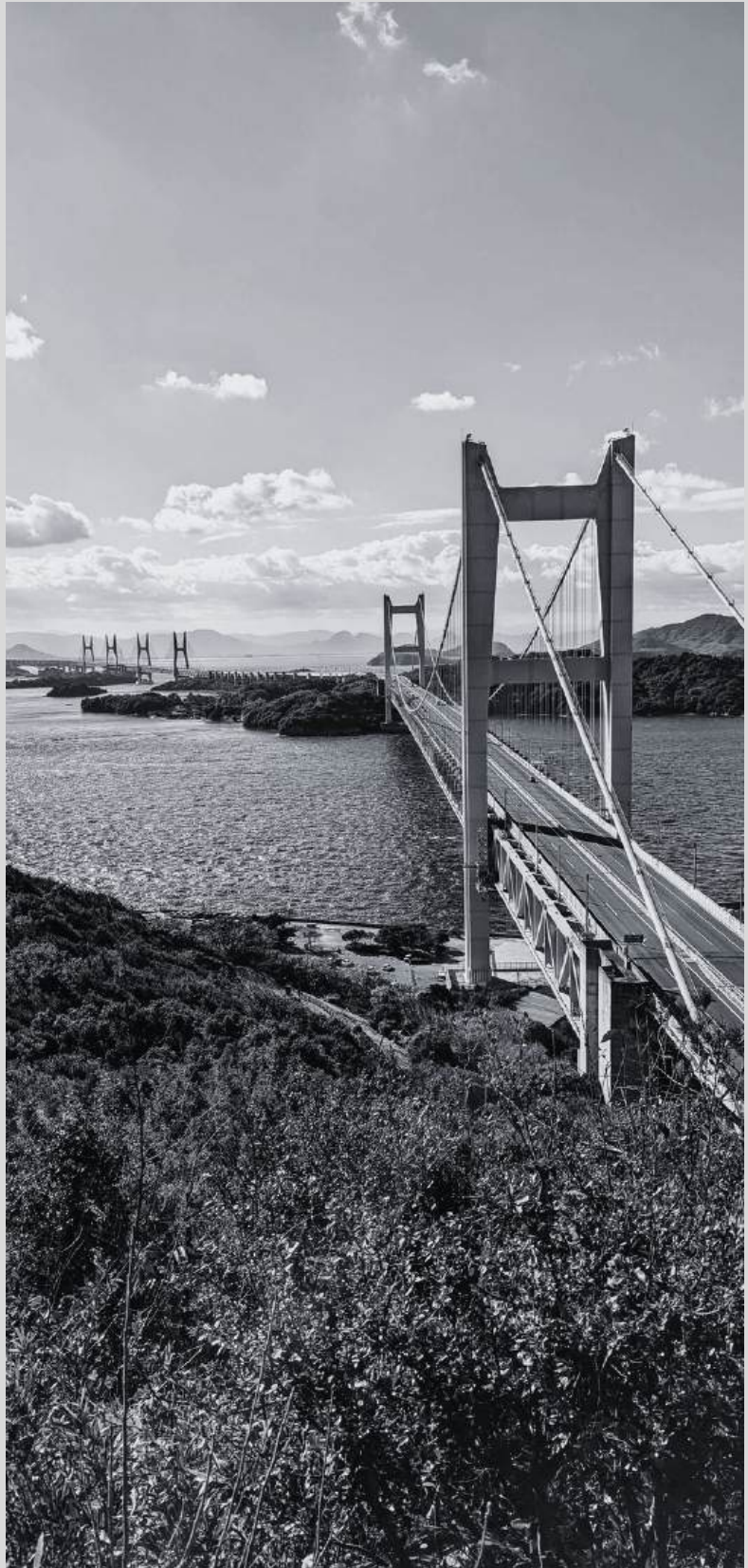
“THE EFFECT IS A SELF-REINFORCING ECOSYSTEM IN WHICH STANDARDS ARE HIGH, BUT CHANGE IS GLACIAL.”



The road ahead is as complex as the networks Japan has already built. On the one hand, the government poured more than ¥70 trillion into construction in fiscal 2023, targeting everything from carbon-neutral transit systems to data centres and high-speed rail. Projects like the AirTrunk OSK1 data hub in Osaka are leading the digital frontier. On the other, many of the people tasked with building that future are nearing retirement, and the systems guiding them were designed for a past that presumed endless growth.

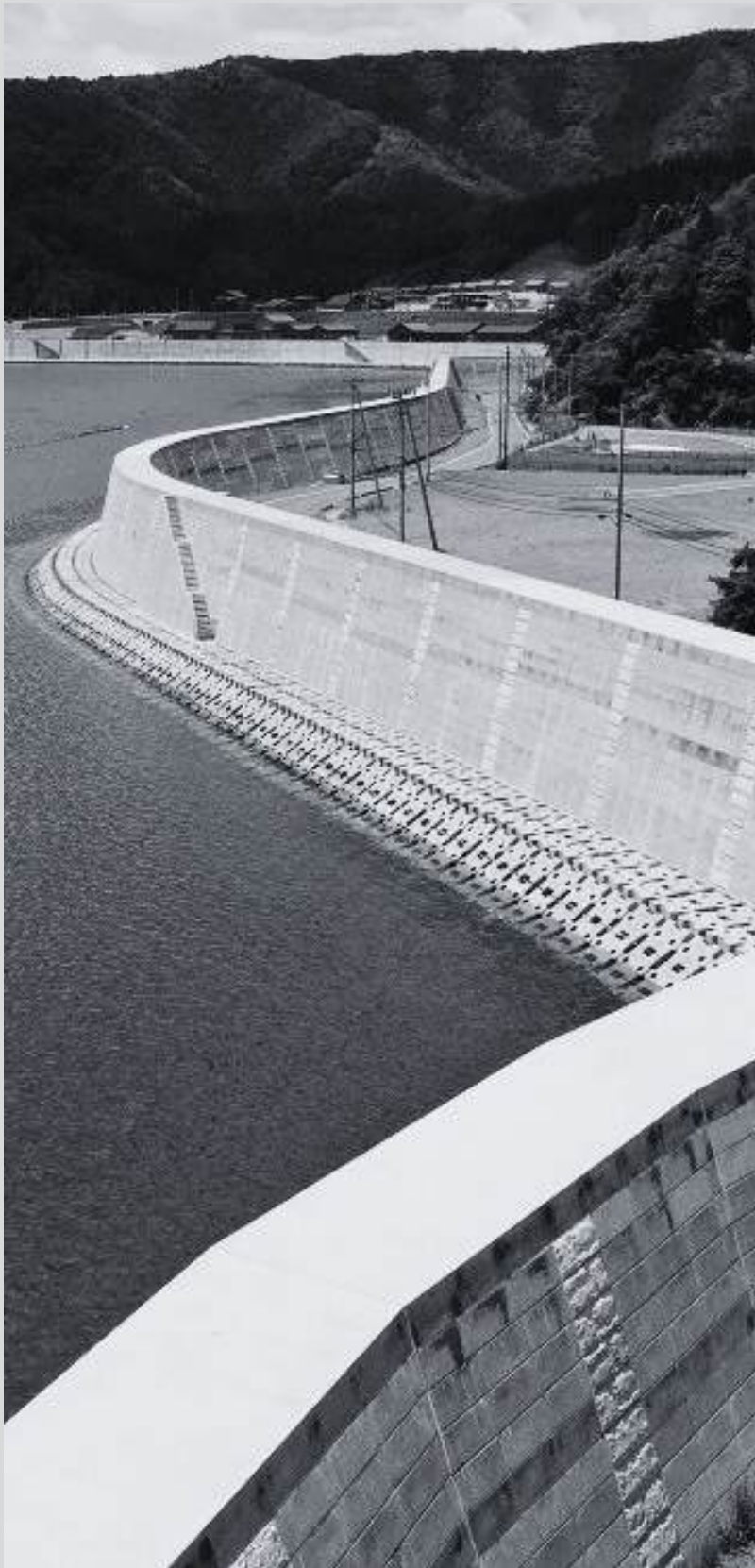
Japan is not unique in facing these tensions, but it is uniquely committed to resolving them through construction. Where other nations talk about innovation, Japan builds it. Where others wring their hands about disaster, Japan over-engineers against it. Where others bemoan rural decline, Japan paves a road to the ghost town anyway.

It's tempting to see this as folly. And in some cases, it is. But it's also a form of belief, perhaps the most durable belief modern Japan has left. The belief that through design, regulation, and sheer persistence, the future can still be shaped. And if not shaped, then at least reinforced.



“JAPAN IS NOT UNIQUE IN FACING THESE TENSIONS, BUT IT IS UNIQUELY COMMITTED TO RESOLVING THEM THROUGH CONSTRUCTION.”





Because Japan doesn't keep building because it can afford to. It builds because construction is still one of the few levers left that reliably stimulate the economy, signal political commitment, and maintain social cohesion. But the landscape is changing. The labour pool is thinning. Resources are getting more expensive. Climate resilience is no longer a technical add-on, it's a necessity.

Japan has mastered the art of building its way out of the past. The real question now is whether it can build its way into the future. Not by laying more asphalt for shrinking towns or erecting monuments to dwindling crowds, but by investing in infrastructure that adapts, regenerates, and connects. That means smart cities that actually serve their citizens, homes that can evolve rather than expire, and public works that reflect not just engineering prowess but the realities of a society in transition.

There's no sign that Japan will stop building. But it now faces a rarer, more demanding challenge: knowing when to build, what to build, and who it's really for.

“JAPAN HAS MASTERED THE ART OF BUILDING ITS WAY OUT OF THE PAST.”





Image: The Straits Times

THEY CAME, THEY SPENT, THEY LEFT

BY PAUL ASHTON





It's 2025, and Japan wants 40 million people to visit. That's not a typo. The goal is not just aspirational; it's strategic, calculated, and already halfway realised. Walk through Tokyo's Shibuya Crossing, the temples of Kyoto, or even once-sleepy corners of Hokkaido, and the shift is palpable. The tourists have returned, not just as a trickle after the pandemic's lull, but as a surge. The buzzword among policymakers and business leaders isn't just recovery; it's reinvention.

But beneath the glossy sheen of travel brochures and bullet train timetables lies a friction that's harder to resolve: Japan is chasing tourists, but not all tourists are the same. And while inbound tourism is being heralded as the silver bullet for economic revitalisation, most businesses are still squinting at two very different consumers, the domestic Japanese customer and the foreign visitor, and trying to figure out how to sell to both without losing either.

You can feel this tension on the ground. The convenience store cashier who politely fumbles through a phrasebook. The luxury ryokan that accepts Chinese mobile payments but still hands out printed check-in forms. The marketing team stuck between LINE and Instagram, between omotenashi and emojis. The reality is that Japan's tourism ambitions are no longer a logistics challenge, they're a marketing conundrum. And one that demands cultural flexibility that Japan, with its notorious rigidity, hasn't always excelled at.

“JAPAN IS CHASING TOURISTS, BUT NOT ALL TOURISTS ARE THE SAME.”



Yet the stakes are enormous. The government wants not just heads in beds, but wallets wide open: 8 trillion yen in spending by tourists annually. But this spending, like the tourists themselves, isn't spread evenly. Most of it piles up in the familiar hotspots, Tokyo, Kyoto, Osaka, leaving regional economies largely untouched. And within that top-tier trio, it's often luxury travellers from China or the U.S. who are doing the heavy lifting. One percent of tourists now contribute over 11 percent of the total spend. That's not a segment; that's an opportunity goldmine.

But even goldmines require maps. The Chinese tourist who plans their trip through Xiaohongshu expects luxury, speed, and frictionless payments. The South Korean backpacker arriving via a budget flight to Fukuoka is looking for cultural authenticity and maybe a bowl of ramen they've seen reviewed on Naver. The Australian family visiting on school holidays might just want reliable WiFi and a hotel that understands what a "cot" is. Lumping these demographics together is not just lazy, it's fatal.

Japanese businesses have historically prioritised a domestic customer base that is patient, detail-oriented, and demands perfection in service. Think perfectly packaged mochi, handwritten receipts, staff who bow at the correct angle. That's a beautiful standard, until it meets the American tourist who wants to Venmo their bill, wear shoes into the tatami room, and Instagram every moment in real time. Suddenly, cultural reverence meets commercial friction. And most businesses are ill-equipped to manage that.



“IT’S OFTEN LUXURY TRAVELLERS FROM CHINA OR THE U.S. WHO ARE DOING THE HEAVY LIFTING.”





This isn't to say Japan lacks vision. If anything, it has too many. One sees tourists as a path to GDP growth, another as a threat to cultural integrity. The tension plays out in the very geography of tourism: overcrowding in Kyoto and ghost towns in Tohoku; bustling department stores in Ginza and shuttered shotengai in Nagano. It's not just where tourists are going, it's who's benefitting. Without strategic dispersion and tailored marketing, the risk is that tourism becomes a form of soft colonialism: extracting money from picturesque cities while leaving their cultural fabric frayed.

The smarter businesses are already evolving. They're embracing segmented strategies that treat tourists not as a monolith but as a series of behavioural types. Luxury travellers are courted with helicopter tours and private sushi chefs. Budget-conscious millennials get curated hostel experiences and QR-coded ramen maps. Families are offered stroller-friendly transit routes and multilingual menus. These aren't gimmicks. They're signs of a country learning to speak tourism in dialect.

The battlefield now is digital. In the age of "pre-trip planning," the decision to spend happens long before the tourist sees Mount Fuji. That decision is shaped by social media scrolls, YouTube itineraries, and blog posts optimised for Google in Sydney or Naver in Seoul. Japan can no longer afford to treat its digital strategy as an afterthought. A blog translated into bad English won't cut it. A website without mobile optimisation is a closed door. The expectation is not just access, it's excellence.

"THE SMARTER BUSINESSES ARE ALREADY EVOLVING AND EMBRACING SEGMENTED STRATEGIES THAT TREAT TOURISTS NOT AS A MONOLITH BUT AS A SERIES OF BEHAVIOURAL TYPES."





Enter multilingual blogging and influencer marketing, two tools that Japan has underutilised for too long. These are not mere content exercises; they are cultural transactions. A Xiaohongshu post about a hidden soba shop in Gifu can fill its seats for months. A single YouTube video by a Western vlogger can make or break a ryokan's season. The currency of tourism is no longer just the yen; it's attention, and that attention is earned through digital fluency.

Even payments, perhaps the most banal aspect of travel, have become a barometer for cultural adaptability. For years, Japan's cash-based economy and domestic e-wallets like PayPay posed formidable barriers to tourists. Many discovered, too late, that their foreign cards wouldn't work, or that PayPay's identity requirements excluded them entirely. But change is coming. The app now integrates mobile wallets from 11 countries, converting yen into local currencies with a simple QR scan. It's a quiet revolution, but a vital one. No one wants to fumble with coins in a sushi shop in 2025.

Beyond transactions, technology is being enlisted to solve deeper frictions. Augmented reality guides in historical districts. AI-powered chatbots offering restaurant advice in four languages. Navigation apps that don't assume everyone reads kanji. This isn't just tech for tech's sake. It's infrastructure for empathy, a way to make Japan legible to those who love it but don't yet understand it.

“FOR YEARS, JAPAN'S CASH-BASED ECONOMY AND DOMESTIC E-WALLETS LIKE PAYPAY POSED FORMIDABLE BARRIERS TO TOURISTS.”



And still, the challenge of scale looms large. If Japan hits its target of 40 million tourists, that's nearly one-third of its total population. The risk isn't just overcrowding; it's emotional saturation. Locals, especially in high-traffic areas, are already showing signs of fatigue. There's only so many photos of torii gates or bamboo groves one can dodge before the romance curdles. Responsible tourism is no checkbox; it's the difference between a warm welcome and a cold shoulder. Which is why sustainability must be more than a PR campaign. It means reducing waste, supporting local businesses instead of global chains, and encouraging slower, deeper travel. It means pushing tourists to destinations that actually want them. And it means telling the story of Japan not as a highlight reel, but as a lived experience, messy, local, beautiful.

The final frontier is retention. A tourist who comes once is valuable. A tourist who returns, recommends, and reviews is priceless. Which is why post-visit engagement matters. A timely follow-up email. A loyalty discount for a second trip. An invitation to share memories on social media. These are the breadcrumbs that lead back to Japan, not just as a destination, but as a relationship. So yes, Japan wants 40 million visitors. But the real question is: does it know what to do with them? The answer depends on whether it can move beyond just being a country that people want to see, to being a place that knows how to see them back. To do that, Japan must learn to market not just its beauty, but its willingness to change. Not just its past, but its present.

Because tourism isn't just about arrival. It's about connection. It's about understanding what people come looking for, and offering something lasting in return. The Japan that recognises this won't just welcome the world. It will stay with people long after they've gone.

“A TOURIST WHO COMES ONCE IS VALUABLE. A TOURIST WHO RETURNS, RECOMMENDS, AND REVIEWS IS PRICELESS.”





Image: GQ

THE REAL REASON AMERICAN CARS FLOPPED IN JAPAN

BY PAUL ASHTON



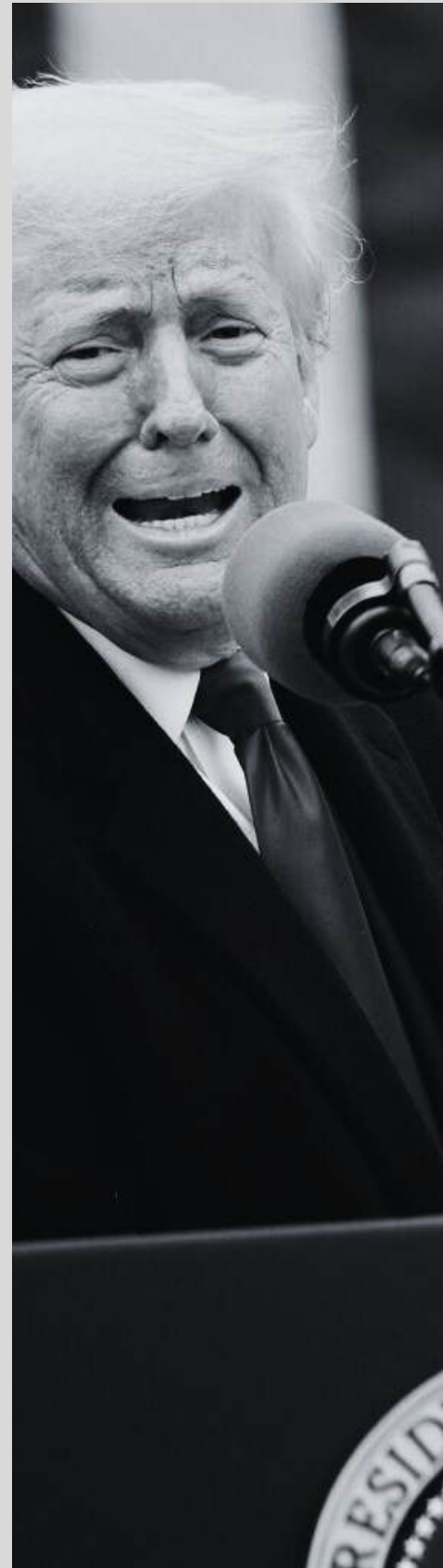
The Japanese don't want American cars. And unless Detroit burns everything down and builds a new approach for Japan, they never will. That absence isn't about tariffs or some rigged trade game. It's rejection. Quiet, consistent, and decades old. American automakers don't sell in Japan because they don't understand Japan. They never really tried to. And now, the market has moved on.

This disconnect has brewed for decades, but it hit a strange fever pitch during the ongoing Trump administration's trade salvos. President Trump, armed with grievances and bold proclamations, pointed out what anyone strolling through Ginza could tell you: American cars are virtually absent on Japanese roads. "They sell us millions," (or was it billions?) he said of Japanese automakers. "But we don't sell them anything." At first glance, it looked like another symptom of an unbalanced relationship. The United States was a willing buyer, but Japan, the world's third-largest economy, seemingly wasn't reciprocating. In a world defined by trade deficits and retaliatory tariffs, this felt like betrayal, or at least a profound unfairness.

Except, it wasn't.

It's easy to cast this as another front in the trade war, another skirmish in the long shadow of global economic tension. But the real story is more mundane and more damning. It isn't tariffs. It isn't hostile regulations. It's that American automakers don't make the kind of cars Japan wants, and they haven't for a very long time.

First, let's clear the smoke Trump stirred. There are no tariffs on American cars entering Japan. Zero. Not since 1978. Japanese trade practices are tightly scrutinised, and yes, the country has its share of regulatory red tape, but so does almost every mature market. Blaming obscure "non-tariff barriers" may



"AMERICAN AUTOMAKERS DON'T SELL IN JAPAN BECAUSE THEY DON'T UNDERSTAND JAPAN. THEY NEVER REALLY TRIED TO."





soothe the political ego, but the numbers don't lie. In 2024, European automakers sold over 100,000 units of cars in Japan, Mercedes-Benz (53,195 units), BMW (35,240 units), Volkswagen (22,779 units) and Audi (21,415 units). The most popular US auto maker in Japan in 2024, was Jeep who sold 9,633 units. But General Motors? Ford? Their combined annual sales barely scrape past a thousand units. Ford gave up entirely in 2017. GM clings to the margins.

What, then, the hell is really going on?

This begins with taste, geography, and design. Japan's cities are famously dense, its streets narrow, its parking spaces small. In this context, the American car, a symbol of size, muscle, and often inefficiency, is wildly out of place. Japan's domestic auto market is shaped by "kei" cars: small, efficient, tax-advantaged vehicles designed for tight spaces and modest budgets. These microcars make up about 40% of the Japanese market. American automakers don't produce anything like them, even the smallest cars Ford produces is bigger than a kei car.

Instead, American car companies have doubled down on what they know: big trucks, SUVs, and muscle cars. The Ford F-150 is America's best-selling vehicle. If a house in Japan had a garage, an F-150 wouldn't fit in it, and it certainly would struggle to fit in small Japanese driveways, again, if the house had one. Some models can't even be legally driven without a special licence in Japan, and good luck trying to park one in a crowded Tokyo suburb. That's not a protectionist barrier; that's physics and practicality. But let's say for argument's sake that size isn't everything. What about perception?

"MICROCARS MAKE UP ABOUT 40% OF THE JAPANESE MARKET."



Here, history drags behind every glossy brochure. The Japan of the 1970s and 80s watched as the Chevrolet Vega, the Ford Pinto, and the AMC Gremlin took centre stage in America, vehicles now synonymous with poor reliability, recalls, and corner-cutting. While Japan's manufacturers were refining efficiency and reliability into an artform, Detroit was struggling with its own internal rot. The result? A lasting cultural memory. In Japan, American cars came to be seen not just as large, but as unreliable, inefficient, and outdated. And perceptions, once formed, can be immovable. Even as American car quality has dramatically improved, the image remains.

Yet perceptions can be challenged, and occasionally they are. Jeep, for instance, has found its niche in Japan by doing something radical: trying. The brand has localised its offering, invested in Japanese-language marketing, adapted vehicles to Japanese preferences, and built a reputation for rugged cool. The Wrangler has even become Japan's second-largest market globally. This didn't happen by accident. It happened because Jeep put in the effort.

Most American carmakers haven't. Ford and GM treat Japan less like a market and more like a curiosity. They show up late, under-prepared, and without doing the homework that brands like Apple, Starbucks, or BMW have done to thrive in Japan. The dealership experience alone is telling. In the US, buying a car can feel like a root canal without anaesthetic. In Japan, it's closer to a luxury boutique experience. You don't just browse the lot, you nearly always custom-order your car from a catalogue, sip tea while you wait, and receive regular follow-ups years after purchase. Dealerships often come with cafés, immaculate lounges, and kids' areas, with staff playing with your kids while you are busy choosing your seat material. Service is white-glove. American brands have rarely, if ever, matched that.



“JEEP, FOR INSTANCE, HAS FOUND ITS NICHE IN JAPAN BY DOING SOMETHING RADICAL: TRYING.”





Add to this the strategic decisions of the automakers themselves. For years, US firms exported left-hand drive vehicles to Japan, where drivers sit on the right side of the car. For a consumer population used to domestic vehicles that require no adaptation, this was a jarring oversight. Even now, right-hand drive versions of American vehicles are rare and limited. This isn't just bad marketing; it's a fundamental misunderstanding of the consumer. (There are some exceptions where left-hand drive cars are accepted, but it's usually for higher-end European cars, not made for export markets, but that have been brought to Japan anyway.)

Worse still, many American cars sold in Japan aren't engineered explicitly for it. They're repackaged North American models, lacking the localisation that BMW or Volkswagen routinely apply to make their vehicles feel bespoke to the Japanese buyer. Everything from the width of the door handles to the infotainment interfaces can signal whether a car was built with Japanese consumers in mind. Too often, American brands send the message: "This is good enough for our market, so it should be good enough for yours."

But Japan isn't just any market. It's discerning, loyal to domestic brands, and proudly particular. Consumers expect reliability, service, compactness, and fuel economy. Despite recent improvements, American cars have never convinced the Japanese public that they're worth the cost, the inconvenience, or the gamble.

"TOO OFTEN, AMERICAN BRANDS SEND THE MESSAGE: "THIS IS GOOD ENOUGH FOR OUR MARKET, SO IT SHOULD BE GOOD ENOUGH FOR YOURS."



All this makes the political rhetoric around “unfair trade” ring hollow. Trump’s lament that Japan won’t buy American cars isn’t entirely wrong in fact, Japan doesn’t buy them, but it misses the why. There’s a tendency in American politics to interpret any trade imbalance as a conspiracy. It’s easier to blame a foreign government than to admit your own businesses aren’t showing up to compete.

And in the Japanese auto market, American firms barely knock on the door. European automakers, meanwhile, have figured out how to sell not by complaining, but by committing. They’ve understood something basic yet essential: that market share isn’t an entitlement; it’s something earned, inch by inch, dealership by dealership, consumer by consumer.

There are lessons in this, though they may not be ones anyone in Detroit wants to hear. If you want to sell in Japan, you have to localise, invest, and understand not just the physical roads but also the cultural ones. American carmakers have succeeded in China, parts of Latin America, and occasionally in Europe. But in Japan, success has never come through shortcuts.



“TRUMP’S LAMENT THAT JAPAN WON’T BUY AMERICAN CARS ISN’T ENTIRELY WRONG IN FACT, JAPAN DOESN’T BUY THEM, BUT IT MISSES THE WHY.”





Is there a path forward? Perhaps, but it's a long one. Brands like Jeep show that with real effort, there's room for growth. Tesla, too, is making inroads, not by changing the vehicle to fit Japan, but by leaning into its luxury-tech status and appealing to a new kind of consumer.

Still, the broader picture won't change overnight. American cars are unlikely to ever dominate Japan's streets. Not because they're American, but because they still don't make sense there. Geography, culture, perception, and history all conspire against them. And unless those realities are squarely faced and adapted to, all the trade deals and tariffs in the world won't change the outcome.

In the end, the lack of American cars in Japan isn't an insult. It's an indictment. Of assumptions. Of laziness. Of corporate disinterest wrapped in patriotic outrage. Japan didn't close its doors. America just never learned how to knock properly.

And that's not trade war. That's just bad business.

“AMERICAN CARS ARE UNLIKELY TO EVER DOMINATE JAPAN'S STREETS. NOT BECAUSE THEY'RE AMERICAN, BUT BECAUSE THEY STILL DON'T MAKE SENSE THERE.”





Image: The Scotsman

NOW READ THIS! THE ONLY GAIJIN IN THE VILLAGE

BY PAUL ASHTON





Reading *The Only Gaijin in the Village* by Iain Maloney pulled something old and familiar from deep inside me, not just the broader feeling of being a foreigner in Japan, but the small, stubborn details of it. The mundane friction of daily life. The quiet victories of local acceptance. And the sheer psychic weight of being watched, even when no one says a word. Maloney's book isn't some neatly packaged foreigner-in-Japan memoir. It's rawer than that. Slower. And it mirrored my own journey more than I expected, especially those early years I spent in Marugame, in the shadow of the Seto Inland Sea.

Marugame was where Japan began for me, and nothing prepares you for that kind of beginning. Not the guidebooks, not the crash course in Japanese greetings, not the well-meaning orientation sessions with diagrams of tatami rooms and shoe etiquette. What prepares you is standing in the middle of a shotengai, utterly lost, while elderly shopkeepers and schoolchildren look at you like you've stepped out of a television. They're not rude, just openly curious. You are not one of them. You are news.

It didn't help that I was foreign and always sweating too much. I'd duck into one of those local udon shops, the kind with steam-fogged windows and hand-scrawled menus, and for 300 yen, I'd get a bowl too big for my stomach, brimming with broth and chewy noodles, topped with a wobbly raw egg and a sprinkle of green onion. I'd sit on the cracked vinyl stool, trying to be invisible. But you can't hide in a place like that. Not when you're the only one with lacklustre chopstick skills and a vocabulary that buckles under pressure.

"IT MIRRORED MY OWN JOURNEY MORE THAN I EXPECTED, ESPECIALLY THOSE EARLY YEARS I SPENT IN MARUGAME."



When the apartment felt too tight, when the walls of the language closed in, I'd get on my bike, a 1980s Kawasaki Zephyr 750, my beloved 'nana-han'. It was loud, probably illegal in half a dozen ways, but it became my escape pod. I'd throttle out of the narrow lanes of Marugame and up the coast, carving along roads that curved like calligraphy along the Seto Inland Sea. The wind smelled of salt and asphalt, and when I reached the seawall by the Seto Bridge, it felt like exhaling after holding your breath all day. For a little while, out there, I wasn't the foreigner. I was just a figure on a bike, engine humming, sea on one side. Free.

Of course, my bike eventually got stolen by a bosozoku gang, but that's a story for another day.

What Maloney understands, and what makes his book linger long after the last page, is that rural Japan doesn't let you be neutral. You're either part of the rhythm or you're a disruption. He captures the tension of being foreign in a place that functions more like a family than a town. Everyone has their role. Everyone knows where everyone else stands. And then you arrive, mismatched and unclassified. The village doesn't know what box to put you in. So, for a long time, you remain a curiosity. You're invited to events but not quite included. Spoken to, but slowly. Watched kindly, but always watched.



**"MY BIKE EVENTUALLY GOT STOLEN BY A BOSOZOKU GANG,
BUT THAT'S A STORY FOR ANOTHER DAY."**



When I later moved to another rural area after stints in Osaka, Okayama, Tokyo, and abroad, I found myself right back at the beginning again. New house. New town. New eyes on me. The same old feeling of hypervisibility. It didn't matter that I could speak the language better by then, or that I knew how to bow correctly, or how to sort PET bottles like a local. I was still the only one. The new foreigner in the neighbourhood. The one old women whispered about behind their surgical masks. The one the kids stared at until they built up the nerve to shout hello! and run away giggling.

Maloney nails this feeling, not just the discomfort, but the strange pull of it. There's a certain addictiveness to being the outsider. A kind of clarity in your separation. You notice everything. You learn the cadence of community by the way it excludes you. And then, very slowly, the edges begin to soften. Someone invites you to help hang lanterns. Someone drops off homemade tsukemono without a note. Someone waves without hesitation. You haven't become one of them. But you've become part of the scene. And in rural Japan, that's as close as you'll ever get to being folded in.

What I appreciated most in Maloney's account was his refusal to romanticise the process. Rural life isn't a return to simplicity. It's a confrontation with all the things the city lets you avoid. You can't disappear in a village. You can't dodge responsibility. You can't stay anonymous. The countryside demands participation. You clean the drains, you attend the meetings, you bow to the same faces every morning. It's performative, in a way, but not false. It's how the community checks your commitment, through repetition, through presence. If you keep showing up, they'll stop watching. Not because they've accepted you, but because they've absorbed you.



“THERE'S A CERTAIN ADDICTIVENESS TO BEING THE OUTSIDER. A KIND OF CLARITY IN YOUR SEPARATION.”

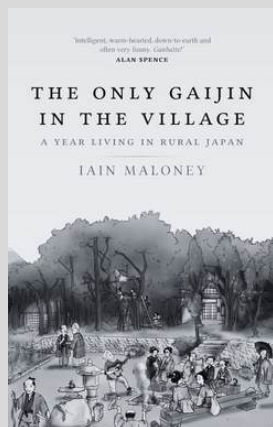




That's what life in Japan has always felt like for me, not integration, but erosion. Slowly, bit by bit, the sharp edges wear down. Not just theirs, but mine. I stopped trying to perform understanding. I started listening more. I learned to live with silence, the kind that fills conversations when you don't have the right words, or when you do but no one knows how to respond. That silence becomes its own kind of language. And Maloney speaks it well.

I recommend *The Only Gaijin in the Village* because it doesn't lie about what it's like to live this life. It doesn't offer platitudes or lessons. It offers a record. An emotional landscape of what it means to live somewhere that doesn't quite need you, but tolerates you. Somewhere that asks you, again and again, to prove your presence has weight.

It reminded me of Marugame, of my nana-han, of the sea, the stares, the slurped noodles, the slow days. It reminded me of every town I've lived in since. And it reminded me, most of all, that there's something sacred in staying, in not retreating when the novelty wears off. In learning to love the place even when you know it will never quite love you back the same way.



- Title: *The Only Gaijin in the Village*
- Author: Iain Maloney
- Genre: Memoir / Non-Fiction
- Subject: Expat Life in Rural Japan
- Publisher: Polygon
- Original Publication Date: 2020
- Summary: *The Only Gaijin in the Village* follows Iain Maloney, a Scottish writer navigating daily life as the sole foreigner in a rural Japanese town, revealing the quiet tensions between tradition, identity, and belonging.

“I RECOMMEND THE ONLY GAIJIN IN THE VILLAGE BECAUSE IT DOESN'T LIE ABOUT WHAT IT'S LIKE TO LIVE THIS LIFE.”





Image: Orange County Register

THE OLDER SIBLING IS LOSING THE ROOM

BY PAUL ASHTON



For much of the postwar era, Japan watched the United States with a mixture of admiration, caution, and calculation. America had arrived not just as a superpower, but as a kind of elder sibling, louder, more assertive, already shaped by the turbulence of global leadership. Japan, rebuilding after devastation, looked outward not for guidance in spirit but in structure. The institutions of American democracy, its consumer culture, and its international dominance were all instructive. But admiration was never absolute. It was selective. Japan took what was useful and left the rest.

That quiet, calibrated respect endured for decades, even as the balance of influence evolved. But in 2025, it's clear that something is shifting again. Not dramatically, Japan rarely does drama. Instead, the relationship is cooling in small, telling ways. Public sentiment is softening into indifference. Trust in American brands is fraying. Attention to U.S. politics and media is waning. The younger sibling hasn't stormed out of the room. They've just stopped looking over.

New data from the Carter Group's Japan Sentiment Tracker reveals how this distance is playing out in public opinion. Net sentiment toward the United States has declined sharply since 2017. Where once there was a quiet net positive (+15), we now see a net negative (-14). That may not sound like collapse, but it represents a significant drift in mood. Those who hold an unfavourable view of the US have doubled from 16% to 31%, and the "not sure" response, the great bellwether of emotional disengagement, has also doubled.



“ADMIRATION WAS NEVER ABSOLUTE. IT WAS SELECTIVE. JAPAN TOOK WHAT WAS USEFUL AND LEFT THE REST.”





The response to President Donald Trump's second administration is similarly instructive. While his unfavourability among Japanese respondents remains high at 50%, that number has barely changed from 2017. The deeper story is in the lack of movement, the sense that expectations are low and static. Only 11% view him favourably, up slightly from 8%, and the share of those unsure has grown. It's not so much outrage as a shrug. The Trump brand of governance, transactional, bombastic, ever in campaign mode, may play domestically in the U.S., but in Japan it's a reminder of how divergent the two nations' political cultures have become. That divergence isn't just ideological. It's stylistic. In Japan, leadership is supposed to signal calm, continuity, and commitment to collective interest. The American model, at least in its more recent populist iteration, projects chaos as charisma. To many Japanese observers, that doesn't look like strength. It looks like volatility. And volatility is not something Japan buys into easily, either in politics or in markets.

That hesitation is showing up in places American companies should care about most: the consumer landscape. Sentiment toward U.S. brands, once a reliable source of goodwill, has slipped into the negative. In 2017, the net perception of American products and services was +14. Today it's -5. This decline isn't a rejection, but a reappraisal. Japan still buys iPhones and watches Hollywood films, but the emotional attachment is weakening. The logo no longer guarantees meaning. This erosion matters because the Japanese market has long been a proving ground for global brands, demanding, sophisticated, and hyper-attuned to authenticity. For decades, the U.S. could count on the idea that "American" meant modern, dynamic, and desirable. But in 2025, that shortcut doesn't work like it

"VOLATILITY IS NOT SOMETHING JAPAN BUYS INTO EASILY, EITHER IN POLITICS OR IN MARKETS."



If the United States wants to maintain a meaningful connection with Japan, it will need to shift its tone. Not just in diplomacy, but in the way it exports culture, values, and brands. This means leading with humility, not dominance. Consistency, not charisma. Reliability, not reinvention. The American image abroad has become too tied to spectacle. But in Japan, what earns loyalty is steadiness.

Brands, in particular, need to tread carefully. The cultural shortcut that once defined American marketing in Japan, bold, expressive, individualistic, now risks misfiring. Japanese consumers today are drawn to quiet confidence, to stories that align with their own values of quality, detail, and sincerity. A brand that can localise without pandering, that can signal its American roots without centring them, will find a foothold. But the ones still coasting on old myths of American exceptionalism may be met with silence.

It's also worth considering how broader shifts in media consumption play into this. The Carter Group data shows that interest in news, both general and U.S.-specific, has declined since 2017. Japanese interest in news about the U.S. has dropped from 56% to 49%. Overall news interest has fallen from 79% to 65%. This isn't about America per se. It's about a changing information economy, where people are curating more, filtering more, and investing attention more deliberately. The spotlight America once monopolised is now shared with many others, and Japan, like much of the world, is choosing to look elsewhere.



“THE CULTURAL SHORTCUT THAT ONCE DEFINED AMERICAN MARKETING IN JAPAN, BOLD, EXPRESSIVE, INDIVIDUALISTIC, NOW RISKS MISFIRING.”





used to. Japanese consumers, ever discerning, are beginning to treat American origin as just one of many variables, not a special case.

Consider what the data says about purchase behaviour. When asked whether the current political climate makes them more or less likely to buy from U.S. companies, a growing share of Japanese consumers report feeling “less likely.” The net effect is a slight but notable decline in trust, from -22 in 2017 to -24 today. These aren’t massive shifts, but they’re part of a longer arc: a pattern of decoupling sentiment from action. The product might still be good. But the brand story? It’s wearing thin.

There is, however, one space where the U.S. remains appealing: travel. The idea of visiting America, whether for business or leisure, retains much of its previous pull. Japanese respondents reported minimal change in how they view the U.S. as a destination. Slight increases in both positive and negative sentiment cancel each other out. This suggests that despite frustration with American politics and brands, the country still holds cultural fascination. The younger sibling may no longer idealise the older one, but they haven’t stopped visiting their house.

So what should American companies and policymakers take from this picture? Not alarm, but awareness. The decline in sentiment is subtle, not spectacular. But that’s precisely why it’s important. Japan is not reacting with anger or protest. It’s not turning its back. It’s simply tuning out. That emotional withdrawal is harder to detect than opposition, and harder to repair.

“THE IDEA OF VISITING AMERICA, WHETHER FOR BUSINESS OR LEISURE, RETAINS MUCH OF ITS PREVIOUS PULL.”





Still, this isn't a closed door. The relationship remains structurally strong, economically, diplomatically, and in terms of shared security interests. But the cultural foundation, the soft power bond, is thinning. Japan is not hostile. It's just tired. Tired of the noise, tired of the unpredictability, tired of a sibling who still wants to be admired without earning it.

And perhaps that's the final, unspoken shift. For a long time, the U.S. held a privileged position in the Japanese imagination, not always beloved, but often respected. In 2025, that respect must be earned anew. Not with slogans, not with spectacle, but with substance. Because the younger sibling is no longer looking up. They're looking ahead. And they're doing it on their own terms.

FOR A LONG TIME, THE U.S. HELD A PRIVILEGED POSITION IN THE JAPANESE IMAGINATION, NOT ALWAYS BELOVED, BUT OFTEN RESPECTED.





Image: Unknown

JAPAN BUSINESS ETIQUETTE 101 READING THE ROOM

BY PAUL ASHTON



In Japan, meetings aren't just a place to share ideas, they're a stage where social harmony is performed. Unlike in Western business environments, where clarity, directness, and debate often take center stage, Japanese meetings operate on a different script. What you see isn't always what you get. And what's left unsaid often matters most.

The phrase “kuuki wo yomu”, literally, “read the air”, captures the essence of how business is conducted behind the formalities. It's a skill that isn't taught in onboarding manuals or strategy books, yet it may determine whether your proposal flies or flops, whether trust is built or quietly withheld.

The Performance Beneath the Politeness. Japanese meetings tend to follow a rhythm: a calm, measured opening; a round of updates or opinions; and a closing that signals polite consensus, even if real agreement hasn't been reached. But beneath that surface lies an invisible undercurrent of signals: subtle shifts in body language, brief glances between team members, quiet nods from senior leaders, and long silences that aren't empty pauses, but loaded moments of reflection or resistance.

It's tempting for outsiders to misread this silence. To fill it with more talking. To push for a “yes” that feels increasingly elusive. But the trick in Japan is not to talk more, but to observe better.



“BUT BENEATH THAT SURFACE LIES AN INVISIBLE UNDERCURRENT OF SIGNALS”





Trust Moves at a Slower Speed.

In many Japanese companies, especially legacy firms, decision-making isn't centralized. It's distributed, consensus-based, and reliant on internal alignment. A client may sit quietly during your pitch, smile politely, and thank you, only to reject the proposal later in a post-meeting discussion. Not because they disliked it. But because the timing was off, the internal advocate wasn't strong enough, or the group atmosphere didn't feel right.

This can frustrate fast-moving global teams used to direct answers. But in Japan, decisions often happen after the meeting, once the air has settled and everyone has had a chance to reflect.

Rather than seeing this as resistance, smart foreign professionals learn to play the long game. They listen more. They follow up quietly. They use soft language, and they wait for the room, not just the person, to give the green light.

Practical Ways to Read the Room

Learning to read the air doesn't require fluency in Japanese, but it does require fluency in atmosphere. Some ways to build this awareness include:

- Observing who speaks first, and how others respond
- Watching for hesitation or glances exchanged among team members
- Noticing who takes notes and who makes eye contact
- Following up after meetings with clarifying messages or casual chats

Sometimes, the real conversation happens after the formal one ends, on the walk to the

“LEARNING TO READ THE AIR DOESN'T REQUIRE FLUENCY IN JAPANESE.”



elevator, during a smoke break, or over a beer. That's when people relax, and the real intentions become visible.

Creating Space for Honesty.

One way to open up the room is by softening your presence. That doesn't mean backing down, it means de-centering yourself from the spotlight. Ask questions, not to trap, but to explore. Accept long silences as processing time, not resistance. When you sense tension, don't bulldoze it. Let it breathe. That pause may be the air clearing.

And when someone finally says, "Let me take that back and discuss internally," know that you've entered the process, not failed to close.

Learning the Language of Ambiguity

Foreign professionals who thrive in Japan don't just translate words they translate context. They understand that hai doesn't always mean "yes," and that a smile can hide a "no." They embrace the beauty of ambiguity and learn to navigate it with care.

Because in Japan, reading the air isn't just a communication strategy, it's a social contract. One that prioritizes harmony over friction, process over speed, and relationship over transaction.

And once you begin to master it, you'll find yourself being invited deeper. Into more honest conversations. Into trust. Into real influence.



"ACCEPT SILENCES AS PROCESSING TIME, NOT RESISTANCE. WHEN YOU SENSE TENSION, DON'T BULLDOZE IT."





Oita City, Kyushu

BUSINESS JAPANESE FOR PEOPLE IN A RUSH

BY PAUL ASHTON



Phrase:

「念のため、再確認させていただきますか。」

(Nen no tame, saikakunin sasete itadakemasu ka?)

Meaning:

“Just to be sure, may I reconfirm this with you?”

This phrase is a gentle yet effective way to double-check important details, often used before finalizing documents, meeting times, or project deliverables.

- 念のため (nen no tame): “just in case” or “for peace of mind”
- 再確認 (saikakunin): “reconfirm”
- させていただけますか: a humble construction meaning “may I do [action]?”

Usage in Context:

Imagine you’re working with a Japanese partner on a cross-border proposal and want to ensure you’ve understood the final specs before submission.

Phrase:

「念のため、こちらの納期で問題ないか再確認させていただきますか。」

Translation:

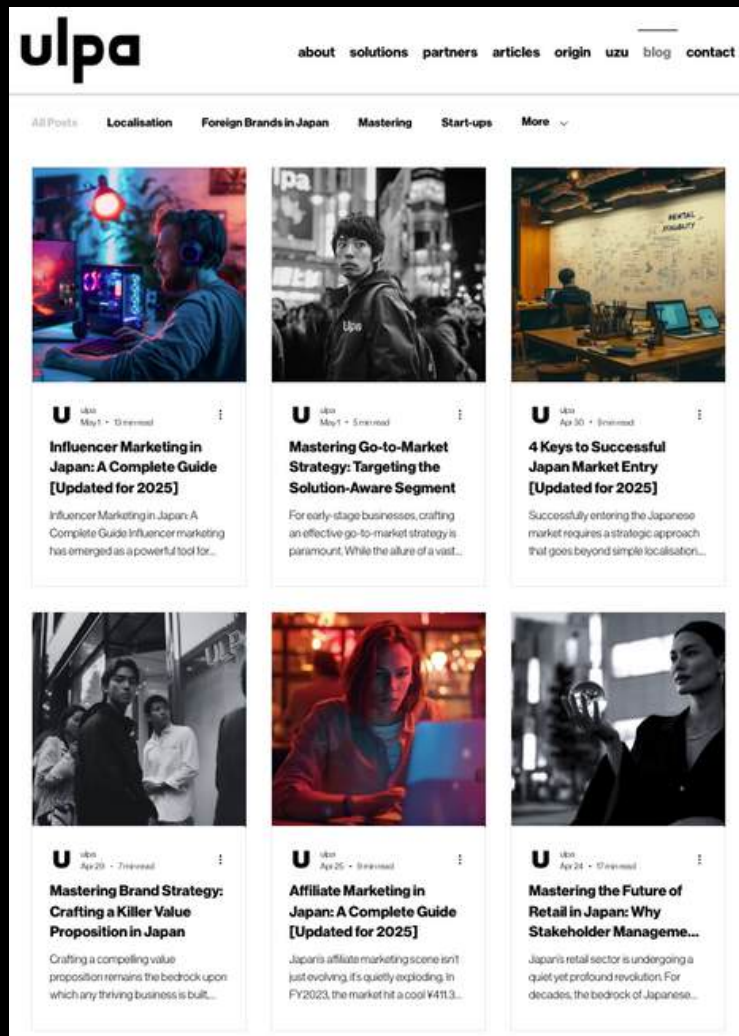
“Just to be sure, may I reconfirm that this delivery deadline is acceptable?”

Cultural Note:

Japanese business communication values humility and caution. Using this phrase shows respect, attention to detail, and a desire to avoid misunderstandings without sounding accusatory. It’s a simple way to build trust, because in Japan, showing care with the small things is how you earn permission to tackle the big ones.



For more inspiration, go to ulpa.jp/blog and read more than 100 free posts on marketing, branding and building a business in Japan.



Say Hello!

hello@ulpa.jp

Stay connected with the UZU magazine and learn about Japan's latest marketing insights and stories.

Subscribe to our [newsletter](#) on LinkedIn or our website and to join our growing community.



UZU

Be The Center Of The Whirlpool