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Title

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Journal

Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review, 1(14)

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Publication Date

2015-03-01

Peer reviewed

The Rise and Fall of Japanology: Recollections of Ronald Dore

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Ronald P. Dore. *Genmetsu* [Disillusionment]. Tokyo: Fujiwara Shoten, 2014. ISBN: 978-4865780000.

Ezra F. Vogel's *Japan as Number One* augured the high tide of Japan and Japanology. Subtitled "Lessons for America," the 1979 book preceded the property and share price bubble of the 1980s that seemed to make Japan the largest and most dynamic economy in the world. Vogel's conspectus delineated a well-functioning, nearly ideal society: excellent schools, good labor relations, capable bureaucrats, and much more. Indeed, many American businesspeople and policy makers heeded "lessons" from Japan, whether the idea of *kaizen* (improvement) or industrial policy. American students flocked to Japanese language classes, and the future of Japan studies appeared rosy. Vogel's book tickled Japanese national pride and went on to sell over seven hundred thousand copies in Japan, making it the best-selling social science book of all time in Japan.

The bubble—not just the escalation of property and share prices, but also the outsized expectations about Japan—burst in 1991. Although astute observers had marked its imminent detumescence starting in 1989, some bullish Japanese commentators were proclaiming then that the price of land inside the Yamanote Line (the circular railway line in central Tokyo) exceeded the total property value of the United States. After the speculative boom collapsed, no one hazarded such hubristic or hyperbolic statements. The specter of deflation and depression swept the archipelago, leading to the common designation of the two decades following the bursting of the bubble as the "lost twenty years." Meanwhile, Japan boosters and Japan bashers seemed to disappear, and fewer students in the United States and elsewhere enrolled in Japanese language and civilization classes. It was not just that no one proclaimed Japan "as" number one, or even that Japan "was" number one; it was as if Japan

had receded from our collective consciousness. The rise of China replaced the once-ascendant Japan; Sinology boomed as Japanology busted.

The Manichean portrayal of Japan (and Japanology) before and after 1991 is, needless to say, simplistic. It is not as if Japan ceased to be an economic dynamo or a cultural powerhouse overnight. Remarkable triumphs can be seen across a range of human endeavors there, from precision machinery to popular culture. Indeed, “cool Japan” covers merely the tip of the iceberg that is Japanese soft power: consider only the ubiquity of sushi or anime in the world today. Yet the downward spiral of interest in Japan and the corresponding decline in the popularity of Japanology seem indisputable. What is at stake is nothing less than a sustained assessment of a major country and one that is, moreover, something of a proleptic case for many of the trends that will affect and afflict the rest of the world, such as rapidly aging population and the numerical preponderance of senior citizens.

Ronald P. Dore’s Trajectory

A retrospective of Ronald P. Dore’s career provides an instructive insight into the rise and fall of Japan and of Japan studies. Hailing from a modest background, Dore was selected and trained to become a military translator during World War II.¹ His first choice was Turkish, but he ended up in a Japanese language class and the rest, as they say, is history. His fabled academic career, crowned by a fellowship of the British Academy, has spanned institutions ranging from the LSE and Sussex to Harvard and MIT. His friendships and relationships in Japan range far and wide, including some of the leading post–World War II Japanese intellectuals, such as Maruyama Masao and Katō Shūichi (see, e.g., Fukuoka UNESCO Kyōkai 2004), as well as leading politicians, bureaucrats, executives, and journalists.

What distinguishes Dore above all else is his singular trajectory as a social scientist of Japan. Beginning with a pioneering ethnography of post–World War II Japanese urban life, *City Life in Japan* (Dore 1958), Dore wrote across subfields and disciplines as only a pioneering scholar can. His works include studies of land reform and agrarian life (Dore 1959, 1976), education in Tokugawa Japan and across Asia (Dore 1965, 1976), and comparative labor relations and industrial policy (Dore 1973, 1986). Each of his books would have made an academic reputation; in aggregate, they are a stunning achievement. If one were to engage in an invidious comparison among post–World War II sociologists of Japan, only Robert

Bellah is comparable in terms of impact and influence. For sheer productivity, Dore is nonpareil.

Not surprisingly, the eager reading public in Japan has sought Dore's analytical insight and sage advice on the state and future of Japanese society and economy. Beyond having many of his books translated into Japanese and giving countless lectures and interviews, he has continued to publish books in Japanese with prestigious publishers. Three notable contributions include analyses of Japanese-style capitalism against free-market capitalism, the nature and future of the Japanese corporation, and the perils of financial capitalism (Dore 2001, 2006, 2011).

It is safe to say that Dore has been widely regarded as a Japanophile, though it is not the case that he has never made critical comments about Japan. Rather, his long and sustained engagement with the study of Japan and his personal relationships with many Japanese people have rendered him as a trustworthy commentator and critic. Hence, it is noteworthy that his recent book should be entitled *Genmetsu*, denoting disappointment or disillusion (Dore 2014). Has Dore, as advertisements for the book proclaim, transformed from a "Japanophile" to a "Japanophobe"?

Genmetsu

Genmetsu (2014) is nothing less than a retrospective of Dore's long engagement with Japan, which overlaps with the post-World War II period there. As he says, the book is something of a history of Japanese mood or zeitgeist (changing media perceptions and intellectual opinions on the state of Japanese society) and of his feelings about Japanese society. In charting his shifting subjective sentiments toward Japan, Dore observes that he has become increasingly antipathic toward Japanese society and especially toward Japanese leaders. He insists, however, that what has changed is less him and more Japan, and he stresses in particular the rightward drift of Japanese leaders. In particular, he castigates the elite leaders educated in U.S.-based economics departments and business schools who valorize market principles (and U.S.-style capitalism) over what he calls Japanese-style capitalism.

Genmetsu is a fluent guide to post-World War II Japan and especially to its shifting political-intellectual landscape. Blessed is Dore to have been a sympathetic student of Japan during this time—and a rare Briton capable of conversing in Japanese to boot—as so many doors were open to him (and this is not to mention his relative affluence: a modest British

government stipend made for very comfortable living in the immediate postwar Japan). Dore's brief recollection of friends is tantamount to a who's who of post-World War II Japanese intellectuals, which includes not only Maruyama and Katō, as mentioned above, but also the Tsurumi siblings (the philosopher-writer Shunsuke and the anthropologist Kazuko), the literary scholar Yoshida Ken'ichi (who is also the son of Prime Minister Shigeru), and a host of other leading literati and even glitterati. This was an era when intellectual discussions and debates seemed to matter. Although Dore couldn't quite shake off his concern that the weakness of the individual might not augur well for the future of democracy in Japan, he was captivated by the intellectual and political energy of the people he met and the past and present existence of vibrant movements by farmers and workers for suffrage and rights. The Japan that he observed and studied was far from passive, obedient, or authoritarian.

Dore's initial interlocutors were overwhelmingly liberal or leftist, but starting in the late 1940s Japan shifted right, reaching its initial apogee in the elevation of the former Class A war criminal Kishi Nobusuke (the grandfather of the current prime minister, Abe Shinzō) to prime minister in 1957. The mid-1950s was the time not only of Japanese economic recovery (in no small part because of the demand generated by the Korean War) but also of U.S.-led anti-Communism and Japanese rearmament. In this context, Dore found in the Japanese countryside a strong social solidarity that was said to be at the root of fascism but was something that he couldn't condemn outright. His ethnographic research conducted then eventually resulted in the publication of *Shinohata* (Dore 1978). To protect the privacy of the people he wrote about, he refused to allow a Japanese translation of the book to be released. Recently, however, he notes wryly that no Japanese publisher has shown interest in publishing a book about the countryside: "Japanese became urbanites who have forgotten their roots."

The 1960s brought the legendary era of high-speed economic growth. Dore classifies Japan, in becoming an advanced industrial society, as being more European than American. Not only did Japanese bureaucrats and politicians recognize the root of Japanese society in the countryside, but they also valorized egalitarian social solidarity. During this time, Dore began to socialize extensively with the liberal wing of the establishment Liberal Democratic Party, among whom he found enlightened and open-minded politicians and bureaucrats, such as the future foreign minister Ōkita Saburō and the education minister Nagai Michio. Not unlike the sort of bureaucrats lionized in Shiroyama Saburō's novel *Kanryōtachi no natsu* [The summer of bureaucrats] (1975), which Dore himself loved reading, Japan seemed

replete with passionate bureaucrats who sacrificed private gains for the public good of Japanese economic growth. Dore calls the 1960s the “golden decade” of Japan politically, economically, and culturally.

Dore is clear-sighted about the triumphs and tragedies of Japan’s “golden decade” and beyond. Whereas he lauds bureaucrats, whether in expanding welfare services or seeking to curb environmental degradation, he also points to the less savory sides of Japanese life, such as diploma disease (the dysfunctional competition for educational credentials) and the condition of ethnic Koreans in Japan. Yet the situation was changing by 1982, when Chalmers Johnson published his book on the elite economic bureaucracy of the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI). Precisely when Johnson was celebrating MITI bureaucrats and their contributions to Japanese economic dynamism, the dominant outlook within MITI had shifted to a more market-centered mindset (Johnson 1999). With the ascent of Margaret Thatcher in Britain (1979), Suzuki Zenkō in Japan (1980), and Ronald Reagan in the United States (1981), the tide had clearly turned away from the valence of the state or the idea of a mixed economy toward a market-centric, laissez-faire economy. In the case of Japan, this shift was also marked by the ascent of a more aggressive defense policy.

Dore’s continuing exploration of Japanese society focused on labor relations and industrial policy in the 1970s and 1980s. His 1983 article in the *British Journal of Sociology* extolled the virtues of Japanese-style capitalism. It may miss something on allocative efficiency generated by strictly market-oriented capitalism, but its stress on goodwill, cooperation, and other forms of social relations more than compensates in terms of overall systemic superiority. The conclusion is an extension of Dore’s prior comparative work on British and Japanese labor relations, in which he found much to admire—as much as he retained reservations about the Japanese way—in the modal form of labor relations and capitalist economy that Japan had established.

Paradoxically and ironically, it was precisely around the early 1980s that Dore began to cool on Japan: paradoxical because Japan was accumulating adulation and plaudits from external observers and ironic because Dore himself was being increasingly open about the superiority of Japanese-style capitalism. To be sure, there was a tectonic movement of dominant political-economic ideology in Japan. At the time that Prime Minister Nakasone sought smaller government and larger military, the aforementioned Vogel book became at once the cause and symptom of mounting Japanese arrogance. The bubble economy sealed the trend toward neoliberalism and hubris. Although Dore discusses political-economic

transformations, such as the decline in labor union power, which contributed to the decline of Japanese-style capitalism, he also stresses the significant role of the United States, and especially of Japanese studying there, in causing Japan's neoliberal and right-wing turn. American-trained economists, policy makers, business executives, and consultants went on to Americanize Japanese society, which superseded the post-World War II model of Japanese-style capitalism.

Dore argues that the fundamental turning point occurred in 1997. Although he does not deny the severity of the speculative bubble that burst in 1991, he argues that Japanese government policy sought to remedy it by deploying broadly Keynesian measures. That is, economic policy—both government and corporate—sought to protect employment, seek wage increases, and maintain low interest rates after the bubble burst. What prevented full-scale recovery was the 1996 Asian currency crisis and the subsequent jettisoning of these signature post-World War II Japanese economic policy measures. The new ruling ideology criticized the old way and promoted “structural reform.” The U.S.-influenced consensus valorized market competition (and hence avoided protecting companies or workers). Neoliberal economic policy occurred in tandem with the bashing of bureaucrats and the promotion of chains over small shopkeepers.

Since 1997, then, Dore sees Japan's rapid transformation into a neoliberal political economy. From Prime Minister Koizumi to Abe, the dominant belief stresses the superiority of the market economy and deemphasizes the role of state intervention. Similarly, corporate governance has shifted in favor of stockholders and short-term gains at the expense of workers and long-term prosperity. Dore also sees negative trends in domestic politics and foreign policy, including the unfortunate growth of nationalism and misguided territorial struggles with neighboring countries. Abenomics and Abe-style nationalism are both deeply anathematic for Dore. He goes so far as to suggest that open debate has declined in favor of repetitive ideological invocation.

In summary, Dore is wary of Japan's newfound adherence to neoliberalism and the weakening of democracy and the rise of nationalism. In short, he is disappointed, and even disillusioned. Has Dore shifted from a Japanophile to a Japanophobe? Dore insists that it is Japan, and especially Japanese leadership, that has changed.

What Happened to Japan?

In 2015 no one would think of Japan as number one, and Dore's soft-spoken jeremiad

is likely to receive a mere fraction of the readership that Vogel's 1979 book enjoyed. As I noted, few people seem interested in Japan at all.

Dore's *Genmetsu* suggests a reason for the declining interest in Japan. Put simply, it is not so much that Japanese economic dynamism has slowed—though that is surely a major factor—but that Japan's distinctive political-economic system has been superseded by an American-style market system. As Dore acknowledges, there are many positive features of Japanese society and culture, but he can find almost nothing good to say about Japanese politics and policy, neoliberalism and nationalism, in the twenty-first century. If Japan is indeed subscribing to American-style capitalism, then one may just as well focus on the *fons et origo*, the United States. If growth is what one is interested in, then there is obviously the case of China. Instead of presenting an alternative political-economic model, Japan has become a pale imitation of the U.S.-style neoliberal economy.

Dore has very little to say about the persisting particularities and peculiarities of contemporary Japanese culture and society. However, its remarkable achievements—ranging from foodways to manga—and perhaps even more significantly its efforts to wrestle with many problems that will only become more pressing elsewhere—such as rapidly aging society, environmental degradation, and social instability—remain underexplored and understudied. What is lamented routinely in Japan as the “lost twenty years” and derided as the “Galapagos syndrome”—products and phenomena that can be found only in Japan—strike me as worthy of recognition and reconsideration. It is remarkable that Japan has remained such a well-functioning society while its economy has not been growing. Its status as a “stationary society” bears scrutiny, especially as rapid economic growth is surely not plausible in a world of limited resources and natural constraints. From another angle, there is something bizarre in the current government outlook that would, to pick a small example, continue to feature Mount Fuji and cherry blossoms in official government posters to attract foreign tourists and not feature the anime characters of Miyazaki Hayao or any number of artifacts celebrated under the sign of “cool Japan.” It may very well be the case that what is so remarkable and distinctive about Japan—the apprenticeship system that fuels its fabulous sushi restaurants, for example—is in decline, an anachronism in the universalistic market society and culture advocated by the new breed of bureaucrats and executives. Yet we should seek to analyze contemporary Japan not only as an endeavor in and of itself but also as the proverbial canary in the coal mine of the potentially fraught future.

The tragedy of Japan studies is that, being swept up with rapid economic growth, it should be swept away by its economic doldrums. Here, Dore's oeuvre—at once historical and comparative, ethnographic and institutional—provides a possibility of Japanology that is rigorous and relevant. Between universalistic social scientists (with their reckless disregard for historical and cultural particularities) and xenophobic nationalists (with their myopic and blinkered perspectives), who will study contemporary Japan? As Dore might put in the language of his beloved Italy, quoting Dante: *Che senza speme vivemo in disio*, or, perhaps more fittingly, *delusione* (“Without hope we live in desire [or disappointment]”).

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Notes

- 1 See the video interview with British anthropologist and historian Alan Macfarlane for Dore's biography and career, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5DPR3ThmgBM>.

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