

Toward the Era of Natural

—Downsizing and Diversification, Maintenance and Improvement, Innovation and Stylistic Beauty—

Written by Kei Kitajima

Preface

This book is a significantly expanded and revised version of "Toward the Era of Natural", a series published in Denkei Shimbun newspaper (THE ICT ECONOMIC NEWS) from January 2018 to June 2022. It attempts to shed as much light as possible on the current era, a time of great change. As is well known, social issues in Japan are erupting like magma, calling for a new direction that breaks away from the past. What are the true essences of these issues, and how can they be resolved? I believed that by reporting and examining them, I could shed light on the direction of the next era.

Throughout the series, I endeavored to remain as uninhibited as possible and conduct unconventional interviews and analysis. What I have come to see is that the world is full of exceptions. To put it bluntly, the world is made up of exceptions. As diversification of values spreads along with the evolution of cutting-edge technologies such as ICT, this world full of exceptions will become even more clearly visible.

For people to live comfortably in a society full of exceptions, we need regulations, systems, and common sense that take exceptions into account. In other words, I argue that creating a society where each individual can live naturally will lead to a sustainable and livable society.

This is my personal opinion, but Japanese society currently places too many restrictions and constraints on people, including unwritten rules. Simply put, it's too intrusive. When economic growth was as robust as in the past and daily life was stable and prosperous, people might have accepted restrictions and constraints, thinking, "Well, that's how it is." However, with economic growth declining and "degrowth" being talked about around the world, restrictions and constraints seem useless to people and may even feel like a hindrance.

The social issues that are erupting like magma seem to be evidence that dissatisfaction has reached a critical point. If this is the case, building a society that accepts exceptions more than ever will ease people's dissatisfaction and open up a better future. In other words, we are moving toward an era of simplicity.

Tolerance is the key to this era of simplicity. In Japan, based on the spiritual foundation of Prince Shotoku's motto of "valuing harmony," we will reform regulations, systems, and common sense, establishing only the minimum rules necessary for humans to live as humans. The rest is left to the discretion of the individual, who is an exception. The outcome is accepted with a certain degree of resignation, believing that "the world will turn out the way it will." This is, so to speak, following the path of heaven and forsaking one's own self. Following the path of heaven and forsaking one's own self is the state of mind that Natsume Soseki reached in his later years. Do your best with your own honest ideas, and then live your life without being obsessed with your own small self, entrusting yourself to the natural world. Conversely, it is precisely because you do your best with your own honest ideas that you can accept the resignation that the world will turn out the way it will. The mottos of "valuing harmony" and "regarding heaven and forsaking one's own self" will bring about major changes in Japanese society. What I envision is a unique society that is comfortable for Japanese people, yet globally applicable.

I would also like to explain the background to the creation of this book. It's no secret that the decline of print media, including newspapers and publishing, is inexorable, with a growing trend toward a shift away from print media, both paper and electronic. This trend has been particularly accelerated since the COVID-19 pandemic.

I've been compiling and publishing my extensive serialized articles for the Denkei Shimbun. Since I'm, in some way, a staunch supporter of print journalism, I believe it's my mission to share my work with the wider public and document it as a record. My series, "Toward an Era of Plain," had a similar concept, and I intended to turn it into a book as soon as possible after it ended. However, it proved more difficult than I expected. In the past, I could reach two or three publishers, and one of them would pick up my manuscript and put the book on shelves. However, the decline of print media these days is more severe than I'd imagined, and I couldn't find a solution anywhere, with no clear path forward.

"Is this just the way things are these days? Is it impossible to publish a book?" I nearly gave up, but I decided to edit and revise the articles and compile them into a single manuscript. Even if paper isn't an option, I can digitize it and upload it to the web. However, the decline in print media is even greater on the web. Video and images are now the norm on the web, and long pieces of text are especially frowned upon. While the general public is increasingly moving away from print media, those who enjoy the printed word tend to prefer paper books. Given these circumstances, I had a desire to

publish a paper book if possible.

Just then, I learned about the concept of "light publishing" by literary critic Nakamata Akio. It's essentially DIY publishing, an indie label. In recent years, "zines," independent publications put out by individuals or small groups of volunteers, have become a quiet movement, especially among young people. This approach could be seen as a continuation of this trend. I write the manuscript myself, edit it myself, format it myself, and then use on-demand printing to produce the book. Since I do everything myself except for printing, it's low cost and offers a high degree of flexibility. What's more, I can directly utilize the know-how I have gained from my job of publishing newspapers. Compared to a full-fledged book, it's a simple endeavor, and as a business, it will require creative marketing strategies, but it is possible to present it to the public as a paper book and put it into a tangible form as a record.

If that's the case, then without further ado, let's just give it a go. That's how "D-Shoroku" was born. Since it's just been launched, it's still unclear what's in store, but we'd like to continue trial and error and nurture it over the long term.

As a slight aside, American rock singer Lou Reed has a song called "Doin' the things that we want to." It was written in 1984, and the content of the song is as the title suggests, but I've been listening to it many times recently, as it seems to represent how humans should live in the age of AI. AI is advancing at an accelerating pace and is becoming an extremely useful tool. Because it's so useful, it will spread explosively, and there will be an increasing number of jobs where AI is faster and more accurate than human intervention. In other words, the number of jobs that only humans can do will be more limited than ever before. In reality, unemployment will likely become an issue, and many people will fall into a state of intense nihilism, unsure of what to do. When I thought about how humans will live in the age of AI, the first thing that came to my mind was the will to "do what you want to do." In the age of AI, humans have no choice but to do what they want to do. Doing what you want to do may seem like hedonism from some perspective, but in reality, it requires a very strong sense of purpose, and a great deal of conviction to continue doing what you want to do. In other words, you cannot get through the age of AI without purpose and conviction. I published this book because I wanted to. Frankly, even today I'm not sure how much value purpose and conviction have, but in the age of AI, humans have no choice but to survive by doing what they want to do.

In principle, the titles and numerical data of people appearing in this text have been left as they were in the newspaper. Furthermore, the author has used pseudonyms for related parties and proper nouns where appropriate.

May 2025 Author

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Chapter 1: Toward the Era of Natural

I'm staring blankly at a Rubik's Cube. Each face of this six-sided cube is a different color. I'm facing the orange side, while the other side is red. The right side is white, the left side is yellow, the top is blue, and the bottom is green. The impression of a Rubik's Cube changes depending on how you look at it. To me, the Rubik's Cube is simply orange, but to some it is simply red, white, and yellow. No matter how strongly I insist that the Rubik's Cube is orange, to those who see red, it will only be red, and I'm sure they won't change their attitude. They just keep arguing, "It's orange," "It's red."

This parallel line resembles the current state of Japanese society. Each person insists on seeing something as they see it, saying it's orange, or red, or a different blue, refusing to listen to the other person's opinion and stubbornly sticking to their guns. No one is lying, and no one is trying to deceive the other. That's why it's so tricky: everyone has their own beliefs and never wavers. Society is always bustling with activity, but in the end, nothing moves. It would be fine if Japan were developing steadily without any movement. However, Japan today is becoming increasingly impoverished and in decline.

How can we change this situation? One solution is to broaden our perspective. Why insist that others see red or green when the color is clearly blue? We need to be open to consider whether they see something we don't.

In an age where diversity is highly valued, it is considered beneficial for individuals to fully express their individuality. This age of diversity is also an age where a wide range

of opinions and ideas emerge. It is hoped that this will lead to innovation and transform society. One key to surviving such times is to broaden our perspective and consider others. Otherwise, the deliberation that drives change will simply go nowhere and nothing will happen. If nothing happens, we will sink into a narrow-minded, uniform world.

Another solution is to be tolerant of contradictions. I interpret contradictions as something close to instinct, innate in humans. "Reason is like a grain of rice floating in a sea of sensibility." I remember these words being from the American philosopher William James, but humans are animals governed by their senses. In other words, we are controlled by our unconscious. If humans were conscious animals, most problems could be solved using scientific methodology within space and time, such as $1 + 1 = 2$, or $2 + 2 = 4$. The unconscious, on the other hand, is outside space and time, and scientific methodology does not necessarily apply. Sometimes $1 + 1 = 2$, and sometimes, for some reason, $1 + 1 = 10$, or even -100 . It's completely absurd. On the other hand, the unconscious gives rise to new innovations, dramatically changing the way we live and society. The unconscious, full of contradictions, also holds infinite potential. The unconscious may be humanity's only remaining advantage, unattainable by AI.

In any case, humans do not exist solely through scientific methodology. From this perspective, tolerance for contradictions is important for motivating people. If we could be more tolerant of contradictions, we would be able to live much more naturally. We often hear the term "well-being," which refers to mental, physical, and social health, these days. I interpret well-being as a state in which everyone can live naturally. We should strive for an era of simplicity, and the question is how to bring about this era of simplicity.

In conducting my research and research toward this era of simplicity, I tried not to limit myself. As is well known, Japan today is facing unprecedented challenges all over the place. The fact that we are so riddled with challenges likely reflects a shift in society's course. Limiting yourself to conform to the norms and customs of a society that is so skewed will prevent you from finding a solution.

When you assert something, you're labeled "right-wing," "left-wing," "conservative," or "liberal." This trend has become increasingly pronounced in recent years. I dislike ideological categorization because it's superficial. While I don't think it's pointless, it ultimately limits the richness of thought that individuals inherently possess. According to the Nolan Chart, I'm both a libertarian and a totalitarian, a liberal and a patriotic

conservative. In short, I'm a complete mess. But in today's society, where values are so diverse, there are probably many people like me.

Author Yoko Hagiwara wrote the following about her mentor, Tono Yamagishi:

"Whenever we met, he would always talk about difficult ideological topics, and he would repeatedly emphasize that literature must be about a free spirit. He taught me the true essence of literature, that we must not be bound by common sense or restrict ourselves."

Amidst the complex web of issues, if we are to aspire to a more genuine age, we must not be bound by common sense.

This book covers a wide range of topics, and I was at a loss as to where to start. Then I suddenly remembered a "diagram of the overall structure of the lifeworld" that I learned about in a university class. At the time, Professor Kamikawa Masahiko, a leading figure in Japanese philosophy, advocated something called the "Kamikawa Philosophy," stressing the importance of individuals taking an active role in all areas of the lifeworld. "So basically, you have to decide your own affairs," I thought, a lazy student, and after that I stopped attending school much. But now I've come to appreciate its importance. It seems there's no better time for philosophy than an era where transformation and exploration are the watchwords, so I decided to use the "Overall Structural Diagram of the Lifeworld" as reference.

In today's world, where values are so diverse and continue to expand, integrating values across the board is all but impossible. The reason modern philosophy has failed to come up with social solutions is that it has lost sight of the meaning of value integration.

My ideal is this: Imagine a country (or society or region) as one big stage. On that stage, individuals act freely, trusting their own judgment. It's very simple, but as people practice various ways of life based on their own judgment, the "age of simplicity" will unfold.

If the stage is solid, the activities that unfold on it will also be stable and flourish. If the stage is fragile, they will be unstable and stagnate. A stage must be solid. In other words, it must be equipped with the minimum necessary social functions. This is the essence of holistic optimization. On the other hand, no matter how magnificent a stage may be, if there is no one to sing and dance on it, it is a waste. It is important that anyone can easily perform on stage and act freely. This is the essence of individual optimization. For example, issues such as same-sex marriage and euthanasia fall under the category of

individual optimization, and I believe that people who share this worldview should tackle them independently. On the other hand, I believe that issues such as a declining birthrate and aging population, and the gap between urban and rural areas are related to holistic optimization and need to be shared by the entire nation. The Age of Basics will be premised on a society that develops through the dual wheels of holistic and individual optimization.

Based on a population of 45 million

I was staring blankly at a graph showing Japan's population trends when I noticed something.

For roughly 150 years, from the Meiji Restoration to the early 2000s, Japan's population doubled exponentially, but this period showed the most unnatural curve in Japan's long history. It was so unnatural that it could only be described as a sudden mutation.

During the Meiji era, Western powers dominated the world, and Japan, a latecomer, wanted to become strong as quickly as possible to avoid being colonized. In order to achieve the goals of enriching the country and strengthening its military and promoting industry, the nation as a whole semi-forced a population increase. I don't think this decision was wrong, but it resulted in an unnatural population structure. It would be strange if something didn't go wrong, as the population more than tripled in just 150 years. Even at its peak, population trends before the Meiji era only saw an increase of a few million people over a century. If the population had continued to grow naturally as it did before the Meiji era, the population by around 2100 would likely be around 45 million. If we apply a ruler to the trend of population growth from ancient times to modern times, we get roughly that figure.

Various issues, such as declining birthrates and labor shortages, have been pointed out, and they certainly need to be resolved, but if we look at the bigger picture, Japan is not actually at a dead end or in decline; rather, it may simply be trying to return to its natural, normal state. And perhaps this is the unspoken consensus among Japanese people. Perhaps the current predicament is a cacophony of an unnatural era that has continued for some time, and will disappear as things return to normal. If that's the case, then we should simply accept the current trend and then envision Japan's future.

Specifically, we can consider this in two stages.

The first stage is how to ensure social stability amid a rapid population decline toward 2100.

The second stage is how to build an optimal social ecosystem for the period beyond 2100, assuming a population of around 45 million.

Whether it's the well-being or quality of life of the people, these cannot be achieved unless society is in a normal state. The current population decline is a step toward normalization, and we are indeed moving toward an era of simplicity. Viewed this way, we can paint a constructive scenario for the future.

Japan's population will be just over 120 million in 2025. This will fall to around 87 million by 2060. Incidentally, the population peaked in 2008 at 128.08 million. The working-age population (aged 15 to 65) is currently 68.34 million. This will decline to 38.47 million by 2060. The question now is how to respond to the changes that will occur over the next 35 years.

Today's Japan is a muscular, strong man with the physique of a sumo wrestler. This muscular man could then be transformed into one more like a boxer. By shedding excess fat and honing flexible, supple muscles, he could be transformed into a lean, toned physique.

Given the scarcity of resources and the severe population decline, Japan's only chance for survival is to focus on maintaining its current national strength. This is no easy task, and will require a variety of changes. ICT and digitalization are among the drivers of change.

For example, let's say the work of three departments, A, B, and C, is combined into one department, D. Each department, A, B, and C, has 10 staff members, and their combined revenue is 30 million yen. Revenue per person is 1 million yen.

By combining A, B, C, and D into one department, and utilizing AI, quantum computers, robots, and other technologies, the work that previously took 30 people can now be done by just three people, and revenue per person will increase to 10 million yen. As consumer spending declines, D's revenue of 30 million yen may be halved to 15 million yen. Even so, revenue per person would be 5 million yen, and productivity would be five times higher. Creating this kind of trend will maintain and improve Japan's economic power.

In the early Meiji period, Japan's per capita GDP was about one-fifth to one-third of that of developed Western countries. Japan then rapidly caught up, and although its defeat

in World War II temporarily widened the gap, it continued to grow at a breakneck pace thereafter, and by the end of the Showa era (1926-1989), its per capita GDP was on par with that of developed Western countries. However, around 1990, when the bubble economy burst, economic growth halted and has remained roughly flat ever since. Compared to the Meiji era, the population grew 3.6 times, and the economy also expanded explosively, but this growth trajectory has now completely stalled.

Since the Meiji era, Japan has vigorously developed its natural environment. Swamps have been filled in, forests have been cleared, and flatlands have been created. This was because residential and industrial land was needed to grow the population and develop industry. However, with the population continuing to decline, there is no longer a need for more land. In fact, land surpluses are beginning to appear throughout Japan. This means that a shift from development to conservation and restoration is necessary. In fact, the Nature Regeneration Promotion Act was enacted in 2003, and efforts to restore previously destroyed natural environments to their former state are underway across the country.

During the Meiji era, Japan's major goal was to develop into an industrial society, with the catchphrases "Enrich the country, strengthen the military" and "Encourage industry." This was successful, and by the 1980s, Japan had surpassed the United States in some industrial products. However, it was around this time that the United States began to shift toward an information society. To provide some clear statistics, in 1992, 15 of the top 20 companies in the world by total market value were Japanese. By 2024, Japanese companies will be a distant memory, with Toyota Motor Corporation barely making it to 39th place. This Meiji-era goal was fully achieved around 1980. This is something to be proud of, but ironically, the world began to change around that time. Japan, unaware of this, has repeatedly lagged behind in every move.

Japan was a leader in industrial society, but it lagged behind in the information society. Digital technology is at the core of the information society, yet Japan has never been competitive in this field. One factor behind this is sometimes pointed out as the Japanese education system's emphasis on knowledge and skills, resulting in Japanese people's abilities to think, make decisions, and express themselves inferior to those of people in other countries. However, even if Japan's education system were to change now, it would likely not dramatically improve its digital competitiveness, given the country's rapidly aging society. This is because it has always been young people who make groundbreaking digital breakthroughs. Older people have always been less productive and less likely to

consume. With a few exceptions, this trend is universal.

Japan is a leading aging society, but within the next 20 to 30 years, countries around the world will also become aging societies, meaning the number of young people will decrease. As a result, digital innovation is on the decline worldwide, and this trend will likely bring the information society into a transitional period. Just as we transitioned from an industrial society to an information society, I believe we will transition from the information society to the next society. When considering Japan's future, it is important to foresee and prepare for the society that comes after the information society. If innovation becomes more difficult due to the global aging population in the future, it will be essential to eagerly embrace existing innovations as a way of life.

The keyword for changing the direction of Japanese society is "contraction." While some view this term as a negative, I see it as a positive. From the perspective of environmental conservation, a declining population is a wonderful condition. Some call for accepting foreign workers, citing a shrinking labor force and the resulting economic downturn, but this is premature. Rather than sourcing labor from overseas, it would be more effective to promote the spread of existing ICT, AI, and robots. Even without any special innovation, existing technology can adequately cover labor needs. Rather than a crisis, population decline should be viewed as an opportunity.

One example is agricultural automation. GPS has an error margin of several meters, making it difficult to automatically control agricultural equipment on Japan's limited farmland. However, Japan's unique quasi-zenith satellite system reduces this error to within a few centimeters. This would facilitate agricultural automation and alleviate the agricultural labor shortage. The same can be said for plant factories. For example, the Netherlands has achieved productivity nearly 10 times that of Japan. The Netherlands makes full use of IoT to collect vast amounts of data in unmanned plant factories, allowing them to cultivate crops under optimal sunlight and water conditions. If Japan were to follow the example of the Netherlands, agricultural productivity would surely improve.

Visiting a farm in Misato Town, Akita Prefecture

The labor shortage is an unavoidable and important topic when considering the Japanese economy. However, the answer is almost clear: proactively utilizing digitalization. The

labor shortage can only be resolved by promoting digitalization to automate and reduce the number of workers required for work. This means using digital technology to enable a few people to do work that previously required 10 people. From this perspective, we investigated the current situation in the primary industry, where the labor shortage is considered particularly serious. The story began in July 2017.

Takahiro Fujiwara is a farmer who grows edamame soybeans in Misato Town, Senboku District, Akita Prefecture. He is also the representative of the agricultural corporation Jagrons, and grows spinach in Tsu City, Mie Prefecture. He calls this type of farming "migratory bird farming." I met him in Misato Town and asked him about the current situation surrounding agriculture.

"Akita is seeing a decrease in the workforce due to an aging population, but we're seeing some interesting movements from young people," he said right from the start.

Akita is one of Japan's leading rice-producing regions. However, there is currently a growing momentum to grow crops other than rice. This tendency is particularly strong among young farmers. The main reasons for this are the falling selling price of rice and the soaring cost of the machinery used in the farming (as of 2017). While rice used to sell for around 20,000 yen per kilogram, the price has now fallen to less than half that.

"There are still people who say that farming isn't about growing rice," Fujiwara says with a shrug. "Future agriculture must be thought of as a business, not just a cooperative of farmers who simply produce. Taking on new challenges without fear of risk, or tackling something unconventional, are two very important points."

Fujiwara introduced us to some energetic young farmers in Misato Town. One of them was Hiroo Takahashi (34 at the time), owner of Fairy Farm, which produces cucumbers and other vegetables in greenhouses. Originally a key member of the agricultural cooperative, he left to pursue new endeavors, wanting more freedom and the freedom to use his ideas. Takahashi is dedicated to the pursuit of delicious cucumbers. Specifically, he aims to produce cucumbers that have a subtle sweetness that spreads in your mouth the moment you eat them. He also grows heart- and star-shaped cucumbers, which are apparently popular for their innovativeness and sell well at events.

"The secret to their deliciousness is the right balance of glutamic acid and sucrose. I start by analyzing the soil, then quantify the fertilizer in detail and add nitrogen and phosphate. That alone won't make them tasty, so I also mix in minerals like zinc, copper,

and manganese, which I quantify precisely. This ensures that the deliciousness of the glutamic acid and sucrose blends perfectly," Takahashi says, explaining the know-how behind cucumber cultivation. It's quite technical, and a bit of a challenge for an outsider like me, but his passion for cucumber cultivation is palpable. He also pays careful attention to water management, as cucumbers suffer from oxygen deprivation if they get too much water, which disrupts their delicious mechanism.

"Right now, we do it manually using a moisture meter, but the next step is to introduce an automated monitoring system. Once that's in place, we'll be able to do even more interesting things," says Takahashi.

Takahashi studied agriculture at a university in Tokyo and immediately took over his grandfather's farm after graduating. His grandfather focused on cucumber cultivation from 1976 to 2006 and was a dedicated farmer who won numerous awards. His father, by the way, is not involved in agriculture.

Most farmers in Misato are over 60 years old, and they remain members of the youth group until they are 45. Conversely, there are very few in their 50s. Most are in their 60s or 40s or younger, with an average age of around 65. Even 60 years old is considered young.

Takahashi used to focus on rice farming, but currently leaves everything except water management and seedling production to others.

When asked about the use of ICT, he seemed interested but hesitant to take the plunge. Farmers who pursue agricultural technology are reluctant to let their know-how leak out to outsiders. However, he says he's interested in a cloud-based system that allows for complete management without leaks.

Labor shortages vary from farm to farm; some are running smoothly with just two or three people, while others are struggling due to a lack of manpower. One farmer who's struggling might be cultivating 10,000 blueberry trees in a field and managing them with a human-powered approach. To properly manage them, one staff member is needed for every 100 trees. 10,000 trees would require around 100 people, but they can only muster a little less than 20, and ultimately struggle to keep things running smoothly. Many of these farmers have not yet adopted ICT, let alone mechanized tools. Without any tricks to make up for the labor shortage, they cling to traditional, manual farming methods.

Farms struggling due to a labor shortage can be found all over the country, but there are also farms that are running smoothly with a small number of staff. Takuya Kumagai (25 at the time) and Yayoi Kumagai (25 at the time), a married couple, are one such farmer. Using LEDs and other equipment, they develop hydroponic farming, cultivating salad

vegetables like leaf lettuce and tomatoes. They are promoting a business that independently supplies vegetables to supermarkets and restaurants without relying on agricultural cooperatives. Takuya's grandfather was a dedicated farmer who ran his own orchard. His father was not dedicated to farming, and Takuya himself graduated from university in Akita and got a job at a local supermarket. However, after his grandfather's death, he transitioned to farming. Meanwhile, his wife, Yayoi, originally worked for a local company and continued working there after marriage, but about a year ago she became a farmer. Under Takuya's guidance, she is in charge of fruit cultivation as a producer.

"We were originally fruit farmers, so we inevitably had a lot of free time in the winter. To fill that time, we started growing lettuce and other vegetables," Takuya says.

The orchard produces apples, Japanese pears, European pears, prunes, and more. The couple harvests the fruit themselves. They do not employ part-time or casual staff. They usually spend two to three hours in the morning.

Takuya says, "In our case, we have a fixed customer base, so we can make adjustments. But our customers are aging, so it's time to take on some risk and develop new markets." Afterwards, we toured Fujiwara's edamame production site. Fujiwara is pushing for thorough mechanization.

"This is a machine that washes the edamame. It washes away the mud. For customers who know the taste, it's fine if the edamame is still muddy, but for new customers, it's not suitable," he says. "This is a machine that harvests edamame. It does the work of ten people. We can't differentiate ourselves by doing the same thing as everyone else, so we introduced this with the aim of differentiation." He continues, "This is a machine for planting. Normally, it takes two people about 90 minutes to prepare a 10-acre ridge, but with this, it takes just under an hour. If we can turn the program to improve work efficiency into software and have personnel with a certain level of ability, productivity will increase dramatically. Creating such systems is important now," he says enthusiastically.

Report: "2017 Akita Prefecture Heavy Rain Disaster"

Akita Prefecture experienced record-breaking heavy rainfall from Friday, July 21st to Sunday, July 23rd, 2017. In Daisen City and other areas, the amount of rainfall since the start of the rainfall far exceeded the average for a month, reaching over 300 mm. Flooding affected 2,206 homes, 167 sheds, and 275 businesses. I stayed in Misato Town, Semboku District, adjacent to Daisen City, from Saturday, July 22nd to Sunday, July

23rd, 2017, and experienced the extensive flooding caused by the record-breaking rain. I will describe what happened there.

I stayed at Mr. Fujiwara's home in Misato Town, his hometown, and covered his farming activities. Specifically, I entered Misato Town in the afternoon of the 22nd and visited edamame fields and other areas. In the evening, I enjoyed drinks with local farmers and deepened my connections. The following day, on the 23rd, I began a tour of the actual farming activities at 4:00 AM.

I met Mr. Fujiwara at JR Omagari Station at noon on the 22nd. In stark contrast to the scorching heat of Tokyo, Akita was pouring with rain. However, I felt quite at ease, just glad to have a break from the heat.

After lunch at a ramen shop near Omagari Station, we headed to Misato Town. The rain showed no signs of letting up, but Mr. Fujiwara, since I'd come all the way from Tokyo, offered to show me around the area's famous sites. Misato Town is famous for its spring water, and spring walks are a standard tourist attraction. I strolled around places like Midorikawa Shimizu and Kyapeko Shimizu in the pouring rain. Apparently, walking around spring water has a relaxing effect, but it seems that only on sunny days. Soaking wet and peering into the spring water in the pouring rain only made me feel more oppressed.

Afterwards, we visited Mr. Fujiwara's edamame fields. Mr. Fujiwara's edamame soybean fields are not concentrated in one place, but are scattered all over the place. They are cultivating edamame soybeans on land leased from retired farmers, and the number of fields is still increasing. The rain just won't let up. It's like having a bucket turned upside down. Occasionally, the disaster prevention radio issues warning alerts. Fujiwara, however, pays no attention, saying, "It's nothing serious. It happens all the time. The government is too cautious." Next, he visits Takahashi, who grows cucumbers. Takahashi is a young farmer in his 30s, but is known locally as a dedicated cucumber grower. Afterward, he visits the Kumagai couple, who grow fruit and hydroponics.

That night, over drinks with Fujiwara, Takahashi, and the Kumagai couple, he candidly discussed the current state of agriculture and the potential for ICT utilization. As the night wore on, the rain intensified. Outside the window, the disaster prevention radio siren rang.

"I wonder if we'll be okay with this rain?" When I asked, they all replied in unison, "It's fine. There's nothing to worry about," and raised their glasses with a relaxed expression. I figured there must be no problem, since they were so familiar with the area and seemed at ease, and continued to drink. After the party settled down, Fujiwara guided us to Rokugo Onsen Atatakayama. It was a popular local spot, packed with people. It was

raining heavily as usual, but the locals were relaxing in the hot springs.

The next day, I woke up at 4:00 AM to cover Fujiwara and his team's farm work. Fujiwara and his part-time employees worked hard in the pouring rain. According to Fujiwara, they carried out a "fire ant" operation that day, dispatching several tractors and trucks to harvest a large number of edamame beans (with stems attached). They brought the beans to their workshop, where they removed them from the stems with a machine and washed them in a washing machine. The washed beans were then sorted into bags for shipping. After watching the entire process, I was about to wrap up my interview and head back to Tokyo. Just then, Fujiwara called out to me.

"Hey, this rain might be pretty bad. I'm worried about the fields, so I'll go and take a look. What do you think, Kitajima?" Since I'd come all the way, I nodded and got into Fujiwara's car.

"This rain is a blessing for the crops," I said. Fujiwara looked worried and replied, "No, it's not good for edamame beans. They rot if they drink too much water. It's good rain for rice, though." The heavy rain cast a haze over the surrounding area. Fujiwara checked each of the scattered fields one by one. Fortunately, most seemed fine. However, some were experiencing large amounts of water due to landslides. "This is bad, the fields are flooded," he said, looking gravely as the water mercilessly poured into the fields. A neighbor spotted him and called out to him. According to the man, nearby homes were suffering from flooding above floor level. "It's been five years since we've seen such heavy rain," he said excitedly.

I decided it would be best to return to Tokyo early. I had a reason to return today (the 23rd). I had a business trip to Kansai from the 24th to the 28th, and I already had numerous appointments, so I needed to catch the Shinkansen to Osaka that morning. When I told Fujiwara about this, he immediately drove me to JR Omagari Station. It was a little after 10:00 AM. I had booked a ticket on the Akita Shinkansen, which would arrive in Tokyo that evening. If I left Misato now, I'd arrive at the station by 11:00 AM. Maybe I could change to an earlier Shinkansen. "You should check to make sure the Shinkansen is running," I thought. Following Fujiwara's advice, I checked on my smartphone and found that all Shinkansen trains between Akita and Morioka had been suspended. However, they said the service was expected to resume in the afternoon. "It'll be fine if it moves after noon. If it's suspended, you can just stay at my place for another night," Fujiwara replied. "That's right. I'll be counting on you then," I replied. I pretended to be nonchalant, but deep down I was smiling wryly, thinking, "That's not going to work."

I arrived at JR Omagari Station around 11 o'clock. Checking my smartphone again, I

was shocked. The service had been unexpectedly suspended for the entire day. In other words, I wouldn't be able to get back to Tokyo if things continued like this. I refunded my reserved ticket and immediately came up with a second-best plan. However, my options were limited. My only options were to fly or rent a car. I was leaning towards renting a car. I figured it would be safest to drive back to Tokyo myself. However, Fujiwara was reluctant. "You're tired since it was early in the morning, so driving long distances is dangerous. There's also the possibility of roads being closed due to landslides." That might be true. In that case, my only option was to fly. I called JAL and was told that flights were operating as normal. The 5pm flight to Haneda was fully booked, but the 8:50pm flight was available. Wanting to get home that day, I immediately booked an 8:50pm flight. "By the way, where are you, sir? How are you planning to get to the airport?" For some reason, the female staff member on the other end of the phone kept asking me questions. "I'm in Omagari. I'll take a taxi to the airport." I replied. The female staff member sounded concerned, "Some roads are closed, will that be okay?" I replied, "Is that so? But I'll try. I'll contact you again if I absolutely can't make it," and hung up the phone.

I told Fujiwara, "Anyway, I'll take a taxi to the airport. I'll call you if anything happens." Fujiwara nodded and said, "Don't push yourself. Just call me and I'll come and pick you up." "But Kitajima, you're acting like a war journalist." I asked a taxi parked in front of the station, "Can I go to Akita Airport?" The driver replied leisurely, "Yes, you can. It's about an hour from here, so we'll arrive at 1 p.m." I was a little disappointed, but I was happy if it was possible. The taxi drove along National Route 13 toward Akita City. The road was strangely smooth. There were no road closures anywhere. The driver casually said, "The airport is just 30 minutes away." I felt extremely relieved. Great, I'd be able to return to Tokyo that day. However, things didn't go as planned. The atmosphere outside the window suddenly became grim. Looking more closely, I saw that the Omono River had overflowed, flooding a residential area. Many residents were watching the scene anxiously from the bridge. Before I knew it, the taxi was stuck in a traffic jam. It was due to a road closure. "We'll take the back roads," the driver said, turning into a deserted, narrow road. Things went smoothly for a while, but the road to the airport was closed. The driver tried another route, but that route was also closed. The driver couldn't help but feel agitated. "By the way, sir, are you in Akita for work?" We started chatting, not necessarily to ease his nerves. I told him I was a newspaper reporter and had been staying in Misato Town to cover agriculture, and it turned out he was originally from Misato. "Sir, as a newspaper reporter, don't you think you should take photos of this?"

the driver turned off the meter and began looking for something striking. His calm demeanor, even in times of crisis, was somehow reassuring. I photographed the Omono River overflowing and houses being washed away by the flood. While I was taking photos, the driver bought two cans of coffee from a vending machine and handed one to me. "Don't worry about it," I apologised, but he replied with a bittersweet smile, "No, no, this is fate." I had heard that the people of Akita are kindhearted, but this is what it really means, and my heart warmed. "But sir, you look just like a war journalist." It seems that the people of Akita like war journalists.

After driving around here and there for a while, we came across a group of young people patrolling in a car, and the driver asked them for the route to the airport. "There's a back road, so follow us," the group guided us. I pinned my hopes on this back road, but sadly, it was also completely flooded and impassable. "This won't work. We can't get to the airport." The group looked disappointed, as if it had happened to them. They were tough-looking men, but deep down they were all kind young people.

It was all over. I was about to throw in the towel and give up on everything. But the world is a strange place. Just when you're about to give up, miracles happen. The Akita Expressway, which had been blocked right in front of my eyes, suddenly opened up.

"Sir, you can take the highway to the airport," the driver said excitedly. "Yes, please," I replied excitedly.

Grabbing at straws, I hopped on the highway and headed for the airport. The highway was smooth. I arrived at the airport in just 15 minutes. What's more, a flight was canceled and I was able to catch a 5pm flight. In the end, I arrived in Tokyo just after 6pm. By 8pm I was sprawled out on the sofa at home. It had been a day full of ups and downs. The sudden turns of events had me on my toes, but in the end, things returned to normal all too quickly. I could only stare blankly at the sky, feeling like I was in a dream.

Visiting Farms in Rankoshi Town, Hokkaido

Rankoshi Town, Isogai District, Hokkaido, is a rural area located halfway between Sapporo and Hakodate. Nearby is Niseko Town, famous for its ski resorts. Rankoshi Town's main crop is rice. It produces varieties such as "Yumepirika," "Nanatsuboshi," and "Hoshi no Yume." Rankoshi Town also focuses on producing large tomatoes as a promotional crop, and the town is actively recruiting agricultural workers. The town provides various support and strives to foster new farmers. The underlying reason for this is, needless to say, a lack of successors. As the baby boomer generation retires, the shortage of successors is becoming more serious. In particular, greenhouse cultivation of

tomatoes and other crops relies heavily on labor, and mechanization and automation have limitations. Therefore, as the number of successors decreases, production volume also declines. Rice farming, on the other hand, is relatively easy to mechanize and automate, so even if the number of farmers decreases, it is possible to expand the scale of farming. There used to be many farmers in Rankoshi Town that produced both rice and tomatoes, but there are cases where they continue to produce rice but give up on tomatoes. While they can manage to make up for the rice shortage with mechanization and automation, they are forced to give up on tomatoes due to a lack of manpower.

Yohei Kato has been a farmer for six years (as of August 2017). After two years of training provided by the town, he became an independent tomato farmer. He was originally the finance director of a major distribution company, but decided to take a bold step just before turning 50 and became a tomato farmer with his wife.

IoT is utilized in tomato cultivation. Seraku's greenhouse environment remote monitoring system, Midori Cloud, measures temperature, humidity, soil temperature, solar radiation, carbon dioxide levels, and more. He checks the data on an iPad and adjusts the opening and closing of greenhouse windows and the amount of water supplied as needed. If an abnormality occurs in the greenhouse environment, an alarm sounds, so even if he is at home, he can rush to the farm.

Kato explains the key points of Midori Cloud: "It has the bare minimum of functionality and is easy to implement. It's inexpensive, costing just a few tens of thousands of yen." While utilizing IoT has made tomato management easier, it doesn't immediately solve the labor shortage. Quickly adapting to changes in the weather still requires humans to be on-site.

"A small-scale farm like ours can run on just a couple of us, but if we want to expand, we'll inevitably need more manpower. If the labor shortage becomes even more serious in the future, we may find ourselves in situations where we can't produce even if we want to," Kato says.

The number of people coming to Rankoshi with the hopes of becoming farmers has also been declining. When Kato applied, there were four couples, but in recent years, that number has averaged just one. Meanwhile, the information society has also had a positive impact on farmers in recent years. While farmers, especially dedicated ones, used to tend to hide their know-how, more and more farmers are now open about it.

"When we open up our information, we get a variety of responses, which helps us further improve our capabilities. This momentum is also emerging in the agricultural world," says Kato.

Self-Logging Forestry in Yoshino, Nara Prefecture

Yoshino forestry has been practiced in Yoshino County, Nara Prefecture, since around 1500. Renowned for producing high-quality timber, I toured Yoshino's forests with Kiyotaka Okahashi, advisor to Seiko Forestry, who has carried on the tradition for generations and is currently working to promote self-logging forestry. This was in July 2018.

First, a brief explanation of self-logging forestry.

Self-logging forestry involves repeatedly thinning less than 20% of the forest, allowing the remaining trees to grow and increasing the volume and quality of timber per area during the next thinning, which occurs approximately 10 years later. This approach to forest management is fundamentally different from the current mainstream clear-cutting method (a method in which surrounding trees are uprooted and cut down). Due in part to global warming, Japan has recently seen an increase in landslides caused by heavy rain. In some cases, landslides have destroyed utility poles and pipelines, disrupting communications. Many people, including myself, have responded to these situations with a semi-stupor, believing that "it's a natural disaster, so there's nothing we can do about it." Meanwhile, Kenzo Nakajima, representative director of the Self-Harvesting Forestry Promotion Association, appeals, "I want people to know about the current situation, where forests are rapidly being destroyed. The frequent occurrence of landslides is due in no small part to the impact of current forestry practices." Nakajima aims for environmentally harmonious forestry, promoting self-harvesting forestry from the perspective of erosion control, with an emphasis on disaster prevention and erosion control.

In Yoshino, I toured both self-harvesting and clear-cutting forests. The difference in forest management methods was clear even to the untrained eye.

Okahashi explains, "Self-harvesting forests are hardly affected by landslides. The key to this is the forestry roads."

Forestry roads are the most important aspect of self-harvesting forestry. In self-cutting forestry, forestry workers repeatedly enter the forest to work, so their work roads are meticulously constructed. Clear-cutting, on the other hand, involves the use of large-scale machinery to cut down trees in one go. Because work roads are constructed solely for a single operation, they tend to be sloppy and careless. Heavy rains in areas clear-cut

using such sloppy work roads can cause severe landslides. This is why proponents of self-cutting argue that clear-cutting forestry should be curbed. However, from an outsider's perspective, as long as clear-cutting remains the mainstream, it seems difficult to suddenly switch to this approach. If that's the case, wouldn't it be better to grasp a bird's-eye view of the forest before clear-cutting, and conduct simulations to determine what kind of work roads to build and which areas to cut down to reduce the risk of landslides? This is where digital technology comes in. Camera-equipped drones and AI analysis would be effective.

According to Okahashi, self-cutting forestry involves long-term work in fixed forests, so all mountain information is already known. Okahashi says that operators keep all of this information in their heads, such as which trees are crooked or which ones are not growing well. "Currently, if digital technology is useful, it would be to use drones to detect and drive away deer," he says. Currently, forests throughout Japan, including Yoshino, are rapidly overpopulated, causing damage to the forests. As a result, only poisonous plants such as ferns, which deer do not eat, remain, negatively impacting the forests. Deer hunting was once practiced, but the number of hunters has decreased, making it difficult.

"These trees are about 250 years old. They can be traced back to the time of Shogun Yoshimune Tokugawa."

Okahashi weaves these stories into his explanation of the characteristics of Yoshino forestry. The trees start small, and are nurtured over a long period of time through repeated thinning. Nurturing these trees was the original purpose of Yoshino forestry. However, it has become more difficult in recent years. Due to issues such as inheritance tax, foresters are increasingly disposing of trees that are easily profitable. Currently, clear-cutting is the norm in Japanese forestry, with many operators adopting a 40-year cutting cycle. Okahashi crosses his arms and says, "Such short cutting cycles cause a decline in soil fertility. It's said that once a virgin broadleaf forest is cut down, it takes 1,000 years for it to grow back."

What's more, with the current falling price of wood, clear-cutting means that the next forest cannot be grown on the mountain. This is because the funds needed to grow the forest would no longer be available. A forest cannot grow on a mountain without undergrowth clearing. Undergrowth clearing involves cutting down herbs, shrubs, sprouts, bamboo, ferns, and other plants that interfere with the growth of planted trees. Anyone can easily plant trees. However, the cost of undergrowth clearing is high on a clear-cut mountain. Without trees, there is no income, and therefore no money to cover

the costs of undergrowth clearing. From an environmental perspective, spraying herbicides as in the past is also not an option. In short, clear-cutting forestry is not sustainable under today's circumstances. For these reasons, Okahashi is also promoting self-cutting forestry, which does not require the cost of undergrowth clearing.

"Originally, forests were meant to be grown and passed on to future generations. If we leave behind good forests, our descendants will be happy, but if we make the mountains strange and trees can no longer be planted, it will only become a negative legacy," says Okahashi.

I entered a mountain where clear-cutting forestry is carried out. The atmosphere was clearly different from that of mountains where self-cutting forestry is practiced. First of all, there was sturdy netting stretched out. Apparently, without this, reforestation would not be possible. Here and there, the trees had sharp tips, as if they had been broken by force, and the area looked bleak.

"These are wind-fallen trees. They were broken by the wind after clear-cutting. Nowadays, these wind-fallen trees are spreading deep into the mountains," says Okahashi.

In recent years, an increasing number of young people have been pursuing forestry as a way to protect the environment and revitalize local communities.

Okahashi emphasized, "For the sake of these young people, I want to preserve forests that they can enter. Clear-cutting forestry just leaves mountains of waste and no forests. If the mountains have trees, you can make a living from forestry, but if they're gone, you can't make a living."

There are many possibilities for using digital technology in forestry. Tagging trees could be used to determine what trees are where, or flying drones to discover where and how many trees grow. Or simulating the optimal route for building access roads. Simulations like this could help with forestry development, such as determining how wind will affect which trees to cut and whether they will cause fallen trees, or how to cut down forests to prevent landslides.

However, the forestry professionals I spoke to were not particularly enthusiastic about these proposals.

They were curt, saying things like, "Maybe we could use drones to chase away deer," or "Maybe we could use them to call emergency services in case of injury."

"I think forestry will become more digitalized. However, this could be used against the industry," expressed concern among some self-logging forestry workers. They fear that digitalization will lead to more efficient clear-cutting.

Currently, Japanese homes are increasingly being built using plastic and other chemical products. With the population declining, it's unclear whether a lumber boom will come in the future. Some say the days of simply planting, growing, and selling are over. Self-logging forestry involves cutting only the amount of trees needed. It's highly regarded from an environmental conservation perspective. Furthermore, most of Japan's land area is mountainous and hilly, making forestry a valuable industry that can play a key role in revitalizing these regions. Protecting forests is essential to ensuring forestry continues for future generations. Labor shortages are also a problem. Currently, forests are not being properly maintained due to a lack of manpower. This has led to the rampant infestation of deer and wild boars, weakening forests overall and making them more susceptible to landslides and other disasters. Natural mountains that have not been disturbed by human hands have the power to heal, but mountains that have been artificially planted with the same type of trees will quickly become overgrown if not maintained regularly. Shouldn't we make better use of digital and other cutting-edge technology in managing such mountains?

Fisheries on Rebun Island

I traveled to Rebun Island in Hokkaido in August 2018 to cover sea urchin and kelp fishing and explore the potential of digital applications. I requested an interview with the Funadomari Fisheries Cooperative. While I'm not particularly keen on digital media, I planned to see the fisheries in action and hear about the current state of the fishing industry.

I left Sapporo on an overnight bus at 11 p.m. to Wakkanai. I arrived in Wakkanai at 5 a.m. From there, I took a ferry to Rebun Island. I rented a car on Rebun Island and arrived in Funadomari just after 10 a.m. However, there was no fishing going on. The fishing industry was closed. Usually, someone would be out at the fishing sites, but for some reason, everyone was off on this particular day. It seemed the weather wasn't ideal for fishing. Despite my long journey, I had to give up on my on-site coverage. It's unfortunate, but this is often the case when working with nature. According to the association's executive director, Makoto Omura, the association is managing to get by with 204 members.

"We're moving toward mechanization in fishing boats. We now have outboard motors

(boat propulsion systems) and electric motors, so boats can fish without being swept away by the tide. We also use GPS and fish finders," he says.

However, that's about the extent of the effort, and there's been no momentum to utilize advanced technologies like AI and IoT.

Meanwhile, the labor shortage is becoming more serious. At its peak, the association had around 1,000 members, but as of 2018, that number has fallen to 204. Despite this, mechanization and other factors have increased the amount of catch per person.

"There's no retirement age in our job, so as long as you're healthy, you can work forever. That's one of the attractions of fishing," says Omura.

The average age of fishermen on Rebun Island is over 60. Even when they advertise for young people, they often end up with people in their 70s applying. In response to the outflow of human resources, during long holidays such as Obon, hostesses are sometimes invited from Susukino to work on the island. Some fishermen go to urban areas such as Sapporo or Asahikawa during their long holidays and never return. This tendency is particularly strong among young fishermen, who are attracted by the glamour of the entertainment districts. As these are strong young people trained in fishing, finding work in urban areas is easy, and they end up settling down. If there were entertainment districts on the island, fewer fishermen would go out of their way to travel to urban areas, and some hostesses have come to like the island so much that they move there.

The interview this time focused less on digital issues and more on issues surrounding the fishing license system being promoted by the Cabinet Office's Council for Regulatory Reform. Managing Director Omura rapidly argued, "Injecting corporate logic into the fishing industry will lead to overfishing and the depletion of resources," "Companies will come in when it's profitable, but they'll leave when it's no longer profitable. This makes resource management and conservation impossible," and "Fisheries associations have multiple functions. For example, border surveillance. If we spot a suspicious vessel, we immediately contact the Japan Coast Guard or the Self-Defense Forces. We want you to understand our role from a national defense perspective."

I see, this is reality, and strangely, I was convinced. In other words, digital use is secondary for those on the ground.

The Primary Industry is a Melting Pot of Diversity

The primary industry is a diverse and fragmented world. It's so complex that it's extremely difficult to grasp the whole picture. For example, rice farmers and tomato farmers have completely different ways of thinking and practices, and fruit farmers are

completely different from farmers who grow shiitake mushrooms and wood ear mushrooms. Apparently, shiitake mushrooms and wood ear mushrooms are actually forestry, not agriculture.

In a diverse and fragmented field like agriculture, standard digital solutions are difficult to penetrate. What's even more troubling is that farmers have a kind of clique. Simply put, some farmers have close ties with the JA, while others keep their distance. While a JA in one region may be proactive in utilizing digital technologies, another may be completely uninterested. Agricultural ICT can only become widespread through repeated trial and error, building up success stories one by one, and steadily expanding them horizontally. ICT providers need tenacious sales skills. They need the courage to work alongside farmers and devise optimal solutions tailored to each farmer.

I interviewed a tomato farm in Hokkaido in the summer of 2018. It seemed like a poor harvest, and they didn't produce any good tomatoes. The farm was run by a married couple, but they were dejected, saying, "This year's annual income is likely to fall below 2 million yen." Incidentally, during the winter, they make ends meet by working part-time at the nearby Niseko Ski Resort. These farmers can't afford solutions costing hundreds of thousands of yen. Providing effective solutions at affordable prices is another key point.

... Most interviews take an entire day, and in some cases require an overnight stay, so I get to chat about all sorts of things with the people involved, and sometimes we have lively conversations about all sorts of things.

Through these interactions, I've been able to learn a little about the mentality and outlook on life of people working in the primary industries. At times, it can feel a bit strange. For example, here's the conversation I got into.

"Any business needs to be passed on to the next generation. For that reason, nurturing successors is extremely important as a job," an elderly man emphasized.

I nodded in agreement.

"This has been forgotten these days. People are only concerned with short-term symptomatic treatment, and there's no attitude of passing the business on to their children or grandchildren," he continued, becoming more vocal.

"That's certainly true to some extent," I replied. "Once you get used to city life, you start to see things you don't see as meaningful as necessary. That's why you don't get married or have children. But it's not really a matter of like or dislike. You have children and grandchildren to protect your livelihood and your community, so it's not a matter of

simple diversification of values. If you like children, you can have them, and if you don't like them, you don't have to. Such selfish arguments won't work. If you think about protecting the livelihood of the entire community and securing a place to live, one of your roles is to have children and grandchildren, whether you like them or not."

He explained his argument in one go. I was speechless and could only remain silent. The book "The Decline of the West" by German philosopher Oswald Spengler flashed through my mind. Published in 1918, it analyzes and predicts the demise of Western culture since the modern era. At the time, it was considered a ridiculous book and was met with public ridicule. However, as the future that followed turned out exactly as described in the book, it has recently been reevaluated. The book argues that humans are divided into two types: "Dasein" (present existence) and "Awakened Beings," and that the end of the age will come when Awakened Beings become the mainstream. Dasein refers to beings that are dependent on the land, while Awakened Beings are not. While primary industry workers are easily imagined as Dasein, politicians and bureaucrats can also be considered Dasein, as they cannot exist without the land (nation). The book cites aristocrats as a typical example of Dasein. Awakened Beings, on the other hand, are people who are not tied to the land. In a modern context, those who pursue money and information, such as bankers and journalists, and even businessmen who promote global business, are also Awakened Beings, and engineers are also Awakened Beings who are not tied to the land.

In the pre-modern West, Dasein was a world centered on Dasein. A spirit of mutual assistance was cultivated to keep the ecological cycle rooted in each region running. The same is true in Japan, where each region has its own diverse culture. These include dialects, festivals, and even local specialties, all of which strongly reflect the unique characteristics of each region. However, since the modern era, the world has gradually shifted from Dasein to Awakened Being. What does this mean? Nakano Takeshi's "The Decline of Japan," a commentary on "The Decline of the West," writes:

"Humans, then, began to place too much emphasis on intellect, intelligence, and thought, placing the value of sensitivity, the body, and life below these."

In the animal world, Awakened Being (intelligence) is merely a part of Dasein (life) and is in a position to serve Dasein, but this is not the case for humans. Particularly since the modern era, Awakened Being has developed excessively and begun to act independently of Dasein.

To borrow the words of "The Decline of the West," "Theoretical thinking detached from

the real world has dominated the lifeworld, and intelligence has begun to run wild, unrelated to facts." We are in the midst of this. Never before has the divergence between Dasein and Awakened Being been so stark. For example, it is clearly Awakened Being that is driving globalization. As a result, while the global economy has grown significantly overall, economic disparities have emerged, local cultures have declined, and the unique characteristics of each region have become diluted. Environmental destruction has also been significant. From another perspective, values that are fundamentally connected to human life, such as pristine landscapes and hometowns, have come to be neglected.

Chapter 2: The Reality of an Aging Society with a Low Birthrate

According to "The Decline of the West," civilization emerges as a culture matures and then enters decline. Examples of decline include Greek civilization, the rise of imperialism in the 19th century, and current globalization.

"The Decline of the West" also touches on the declining birthrate, stating that it is a common phenomenon observed during the decline of civilizations.

People in global cities (globalized worlds) seek to live as individuals. In other words, they do not seek to live as part of a group or a pattern. If Spengler is correct, then the declining birthrate in modern Japan is an inevitable phenomenon, and there is no fundamental solution other than decline. In fact, the Roman Empire, which enjoyed complete peace, also suffered from a declining birthrate and population decline. It poured enormous amounts of money into countermeasures, but all efforts were in vain.

Of course, the contents of "The Decline of the West" are not absolute, but the past 100 years have progressed exactly as described in the book. However, it does not specify when the West will decline. Furthermore, the very meaning of "decline" is unclear. While it's true that Greek and Roman civilizations, as well as imperialism, have all disappeared, humanity has not. While current globalization will likely decline in the not-too-distant future, this will be more of a transition than a decline. In essence, decline is a turning point in society, a signal of change.

In "The Decline of Japan," following Spengler's words, he writes:

"When men become dominant over women, the continuation of generations becomes less important. If this is what causes a declining birthrate, then the cause of the declining birthrate must be the dominance of 'masculinity,' that is, 'awakened beings.'"

In essence, a male-dominated society is causing a declining birthrate. While there are various arguments about the causes of the declining birthrate, if we look only at the

present situation, it's true that the declining birthrate is becoming more serious in East Asian countries such as Japan, where the value of the lineal family is strong, while the situation is not as serious in the UK and France, where the value of the nuclear family is strong. Well, it's a case of two sides of the same coin.

If I may point out, in this age of globalization and individualization, it is relatively easy to achieve a reconciliation between individualism and the nuclear family. On the other hand, the values of individualism and the direct lineage are in conflict and difficult to reconcile.

From this perspective, a new view of the family suited to modern Japanese people is needed.

If Japan's current birth rate remains unchanged, the population will be just under 14 million by 2200, approximately 4 million by 2300, around 400,000 by 2500, and around 1,000 by 3000.

The stable population line is essential when envisioning a sustainable society. Without determining the extent to which the population will decline and the point at which it will stabilize, it is impossible to draw a blueprint for a new society. Of course, we fully understand that the future is impossible to predict clearly, but without the courage to foresee it, we cannot take the first step.

While the number of people in the working generation that support society is decreasing, significant advances in digital technology, including ICT, will see further advances in remote work and automation. By effectively utilizing AI and robots, we can maintain the richness of services that support society. Richer services allow people to enjoy a more fulfilling life. What we need to think about now is creating an ecosystem that can function even with a population of around 45 million. Even with a population of 45 million, if we can build a sustainable, stable society, people will likely trust society more than they do now. They'll also be more likely to have children and look forward to the future.

Currently, countries with a population of around 45 million include Spain and Argentina. South Korea has a population of just over 50 million. For comparison, this corresponds to around 1900 in Japan, the middle of the Meiji era. This was a time when Japan was transitioning from an agricultural to an industrial nation, and when public telephones began to be installed throughout cities.

The declining birthrate is self-evident.

The global consensus is that the combination of "economic development" and "improved

social status of women" leads to a declining birthrate, and Japan's declining birthrate is a natural consequence.

Following the war, the economy rapidly developed, and women's social status improved. In his book "Thoughts on the Global Declining Birthrate" (published by the Mainichi Shimbun), Professor Akagawa Manabu of the University of Tokyo offers the following view, although he acknowledges that no one would want such a society.

"If we widen the gap and create a social structure with a wealthy few and an overwhelming majority of poor people, then the two theories of 'rich people having many children' and 'poor people having many children' will hold true simultaneously."

His view is that the wealthy do not see the financial burden of raising children, while the poor do not see the burden because they have nothing to lose. Putting that aside, if the current situation continues, Japan's economic structure will become completely different from its current one. Common sense and accepted beliefs are sure to undergo a dramatic transformation in the process of shifting from a social model from the era of population bonus to one of population onus. Japan is in the midst of a society with a declining birthrate, aging population, and population decline, and these issues are becoming increasingly prominent around the world as well. According to "The Great Decline of the World Population in 2050" (Daryl Bricker/John Ibbitson, Bungeishunju), there will be no population explosion in the future, and the world population is predicted to start declining by 2050. The reasons behind this are cited as "economic development" and "improving the status of women." As mentioned above, countries where the economy develops and the status of women improves generally experience a declining birthrate and a shrinking population. Even if huge amounts of money are spent trying to increase the birthrate, the effects will be limited. It is time for Japan to take a more realistic approach. Rather than taking random measures to combat the declining birthrate, it would be better to devote resources to creating a society that can maintain prosperity even as the population declines. We need to create a completely new and unique ecosystem that is unlike any other in the world. We need to focus our efforts on innovation that will support this uniqueness. Incidentally, "The Great Decline in the World Population in 2050" predicts that after 2050, countries will compete for immigrants. I predict that Japan will choose not to accept immigrants and will calmly accept the decline in rural areas and national wealth. I also believe that Japan will not become an immigrant nation. First of all, it lacks the know-how to accept immigrants, making it unable to win the battle for immigrants. Immigrants, on the other hand, likely won't want to work in a country filled with elderly people and with an uncertain future.

Generally, immigrants are motivated solely by money. Countries with cheap labor are ignored.

Regarding immigration policy, an interesting article by Aoyama Gakuin University Professor Yoshitaka Fukui appeared in the Sankei Shimbun's "Seiron" column on November 24, 2022. He discussed the economic effects of immigration, stating that in the United States, immigrants contribute only 0.3% of GDP. This is based on research by Harvard University Professor George Borjas. Because accepting immigrants increases the fiscal burden on education, welfare, and other areas, the economic effect, when considering the pros and cons, is surprisingly small. Furthermore, he argues that accepting immigrants widens the gap between the rich and the poor. Income is redistributed from the masses to the elite, and as a result, only the elite who do not compete with immigrant workers benefit. He points out that this background explains why there are so many pro-immigration advocates among leaders in various sectors. He argues that the reason the American public calls for immigration restrictions is not based on emotional arguments like racism or xenophobia, but rather on the urgent need to address the issue of daily life. Accelerating immigration in Japan would likely result in similar problems as in the United States. In markets with low-wage immigrant workers, wage increases are more difficult to achieve. Conversely, in markets without immigrant workers, wages rise relatively smoothly.

Do Japan really need immigrants to develop, and if so, how many? With the global population explosion causing various problems, is it really appropriate to continue with an economic model that relies on scale? Wouldn't it be more healthy and sustainable to create an economic development model for an era of population onus?

The following passage is found in "The Curse of Economic Growth" (by Daniel Cohen, published by Toyo Keizai Inc.).

"Keynes boldly asserted that, given the pace of industrial development, by 2030 people would be able to survive on just three hours of work a day, with the rest of the time devoted to truly important things like art, culture, and metaphysical contemplation." However, he also wrote, "Unfortunately, cultural and metaphysical issues have not become the central questions of our time. Modern society is ten times richer than when Keynes made his prediction, yet we pursue material prosperity more than ever. Keynes, the great economist, brilliantly predicted future economic prosperity, but he completely misread our behavior."

Keynes's time was based on the assumption of population growth. Globally, the population is still growing. However, the United Nations predicts that the world's population, which is currently experiencing a population explosion, will turn around by 2050 at the latest, after which it will begin to decline rapidly.

Depopulation is good news for the planet, since most of the world's challenges are brought about by human proliferation, which is consuming the planet. While it would be premature to assert that population decline will gradually resolve many global issues, it is possible. Looking at Japan's population decline from this perspective, we can see it as setting an example for other countries in addressing global challenges. The problem is economic prosperity. Throughout history, few countries have achieved economic prosperity amid a population onus. Applying this fact directly to Japan's economic prosperity would be impossible.

Japan's population structure will transform from a spindle-shaped structure in 2020 to one more similar to a tall building by 2060. Around 2060, the world will be entering a phase of population decline, and other countries will be facing the same challenges Japan currently faces. If Japan is a resilient nation that has overcome these challenges, it will have advantages in various areas. Using 2060, 35 years from now, as a milestone, we should overcome social challenges and create an environment in which individuals can pursue a fulfilling life on their own. This determination will be the starting point for Japan's quest to build a prosperous society in an era of population onus. Why do we need an environment where individuals can pursue a richer life on their own? Because in a diverse society, standards of wealth vary widely. Some people consider becoming extremely wealthy to be rich, while others consider a life where they can immerse themselves in their hobbies even if they don't have much money. Some people find richness in spending time with family, while others find richness in personal space. Unless we create a society that embraces diversity more than ever before, our quality of life will not improve.

Until now, society as a whole has enjoyed economic prosperity. To put it bluntly, individuals have unknowingly become richer without even realizing it. However, the era of uniform economic prosperity ended in the 1990s. We now live in an era where individuals can make leaps to ensure the richness that is tailored to them. Society develops as a whole. If we can maintain the current GDP with a population of 45 million, our national strength will increase relatively. A declining population also means a decrease in the number of elderly people, which will lead to reduced social security costs.

This will also allow us to proactively consider new forms of safety nets, such as basic income. An age in which individuals are able to make leaps is also an age in which individual differences are more likely to emerge. Some are good at business, while others are not. Some have exceptional athletic ability, while others are not. Maximizing individual potential inevitably leads to disparities. The question is how society perceives these disparities. Should we accept them as the result of pursuing individual potential, or denounce them as "inequality"? Widening disparities are probably not a good thing. But I wonder: What other means are there to maintain and develop our country and society amid a declining population and fewer working people? Unless we maximize the potential of individuals and create a society in which anyone can do anything, regardless of age or gender, if they are determined, and can take on challenges as many times as they like, we will not be able to stop the decline of our national power. If we cannot stop this, decline awaits. There is no more dull society than one in which those who are determined, have tried many times, and have succeeded after much hardship, are placed on the same footing as those who are the complete opposite. This is a classic example of bad equality.

How to Survive an Aging Society

There is another major hurdle to overcome in striving for a society that functions smoothly even with a population of 45 million: navigating an aging society. Looking at the population structure, the aging society will peak around 2050, when it will be an inverted pyramid. After that, it will approach a pyramid-shaped structure. This will be a society in which all age groups are evenly represented, without any particular age group dominating. The population at that time will likely be around 80 to 90 million. In 2025, when the current generation of baby boomers (those in their 50s) reaches their old age and the population structure shifts to a pyramid-shaped structure, challenges unique to an aging society, such as medical care and nursing care, will be alleviated. However, people will be expected to live more independently than they do now. The concept of a mutually supportive society will remain unchanged, but its reality will be different from today. A declining population also means fewer people to rely on. Whether we like it or not, we will move toward a society in which individuals maximize their potential through self-reliance and autonomy, and excessive interdependence will be curbed. If we define elderly as those 65 years of age or older, then I, born in 1971, will become elderly around 2036. At that time, the population structure will be a perfect inverted triangle. In other words, elderly people will be the overwhelming majority in Japanese society, gradually becoming a minority as people get younger. While this is a

huge imbalance, this inverted triangle will continue for about 30 years. By the 2060s, the population structure will gradually become more like a building.

Incidentally, the population structure as of 2025 will be shaped like an Arabian vase, with a large proportion of people in their 40s to 60s. While Japan is still said to be an aging society, in reality, the working generation barely makes up the majority. Even so, there are concerns about the decline of Japan's national strength, so what will happen when the population structure becomes inverted triangular? The baby boomers are pioneers of the inverted triangle era, and their lifestyles as elderly people will have a major impact on Japan's future. If the baby boomers can create a more diverse view of life and death and be able to face their final days with renewed vitality, perhaps this will ease the anxieties of future generations. This is not limited to the elderly, but what lies beyond living a life that is true to oneself is the way to die that is true to oneself. Whether it be death from old age, illness, loneliness, or suicide, I believe that the way of death that a person chooses to live should all be respected. This fosters a diverse view of life and death. I suddenly recall the famous line, "Bushido is to find out that one is the way of dying," from Hagakure. This is a book from the Edo period that preaches Bushido.

I interpret "Bushido is to find out that one is the way of dying" to mean something like, "Walk the path you believe in so that you will have no regrets when you die," but Yukio Mishima wrote in "Introduction to Hagakure" that "The eclectic trend of today may lie in the fact that, in trying to live beautifully and die beautifully, people are actually choosing the path to an ugly death, and in trying to live ugly and die ugly, people are actually seeking a way to live beautifully." He argues that Hagakure offers an exhilarating resolution to this question of life and death. It states, "Bushido is the discovery of death." Perhaps, ultimately, life is about finding "dying" at the very end. Living in order to find death seems contradictory, but the pursuit of a truly personal death is anything but sinister or pathetic. There's a certain exhilaration. If this exhilaration could be shared among the elderly, who make up the majority of the population, society would likely become a little more open.

How should elderly people live in the inverted triangle era? Since this is uncharted territory, I'd like to explore it with my imagination. The term "lifelong active" has taken root, and it's become commonplace for healthy elderly people to continue working in some capacity even after retirement. For example, if retired elderly people could fill the gap in the serious labor shortage in primary industries, sustainability would increase. Moreover, the inverted triangle era could continue for decades. If healthy elderly people who retire from active work could begin to work in primary industries, it would lead to a new type

of economic model. Still, there are concerns about whether elderly people who have never been involved in agriculture or fishing can truly take on these roles. Perhaps in the near future, primary industries will be more digitalized than we imagine, making it possible to engage in both agriculture and fishing without significant burden. Digitalized, smart primary industries will become familiar to many people, and it may even become a trend to work in agriculture or fishing as a side job. In such an environment, it would not be unreasonable for healthy elderly people to be active in primary industries. Working in agriculture or fishing means, to a greater or lesser extent, migrating from urban areas to rural areas. This will decentralize the urban population, leading to regional revitalization and a decentralized, cooperative society. To transform into this new aging society, a change in people's mindset is essential. Without a change in mindset, society will not be reformed, no matter how much we improve our technology and systems.

I believe that positive thinking is fundamental to promoting a change in mindset. Norman Vincent Peale's classic book, "The Power of Positive Thinking," was published in the United States in 1952. It remains a bestseller and continues to be read worldwide. In simple terms, the book advocates a hyper-optimistic approach, believing that most things will work out if we approach things with a positive attitude. Even as we strive for a new aging society, the key is to shift our mindset based on positive thinking.

Depopulation, labor shortages, and an aging society are inevitable. While this is certainly Japan's greatest national crisis, incorporating positive thinking can paint a surprisingly bright picture. A declining population also means more space for each individual, allowing people to live more freely and comfortably. A shrinking labor force means increased demand for labor. When the labor force was plentiful and competitive, it was difficult to find the job of one's choice. However, a labor shortage increases the chances of landing the job you want. Furthermore, since necessity is the mother of invention, innovations to compensate for labor shortages will continue to emerge, and people will be freed from excessive work burdens, allowing them to freely pursue quality of life and well-being. Looking ahead to the future with this kind of positive thinking highlights a carefree worldview. If individuals can enjoy their lives with a positive mindset, society will settle into a stable place.

Changing Ceremonies

The impact of a declining birthrate and aging population also extends to ceremonial occasions. While ceremonial occasions strongly reflect a country's history, traditions, and culture, their nature is undergoing significant transformation in modern Japan. People's

attitudes toward funerals in particular have diversified. In recent years, an increasing number of people, particularly in urban areas, are choosing "zero funerals" (funerals in which the family does not collect the remains after cremation), natural burials (burials in which the remains are returned to nature rather than to a grave, known as scattering of ashes), and tree burials (graves symbolizing trees instead of headstones), based on their desire to "eliminate both funerals and graves." A step further, funeral DX, is also on the way. Funeral DX is essentially an initiative to use digital technology to reorganize funerals. While funerals and digital services may seem like an odd combination at first glance and are still relatively unfamiliar in Japan, it's gradually gaining popularity in developed Western countries.

A 2018 survey conducted by the "Kurashi no Tomo" (Friends of the Living) mutual aid association found that over 75% of Japanese people were opposed to the digitalization of funerals. The most objectionable option was "robot-assisted sutra chanting," with 95% of Japanese people rejecting it. Other examples of disliked services included drive-through funerals, whereby people park their cars at a window next to the funeral hall and offer condolence money and incense from their vehicles, rather than visiting the venue. However, the current labor shortage is exacerbating the "graveyard shortage" and "graveyard caretaker shortage." Furthermore, there has been a gradual increase in the number of people choosing not to hold funerals or simplifying them due to "economic reasons" and "weakening interpersonal relationships." The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated this trend. Given this background, resistance to the digitalization of funerals is likely to gradually fade. Or, even if there is deep-seated resistance, it seems likely that people will embrace it and use digital technology to commemorate the deceased in Japan's challenging environment.

Smart Senior is promoting age-tech from the perspective of a new social model, and as part of that effort, it is working on funeral DX. While Japan remains a frontrunner in the aging and shrinking population, the aging of society is also progressing in developed Western countries and around the world, making age-tech a promising market. The company is collaborating with US companies to develop funeral DX. Specifically, it supports the creation of bereaved families' communities by building digital graves (websites) and online cemeteries for the deceased. It also provides perpetual memorial services for 700,000 people worldwide, including as an online cemetery for US veterans. President Tetsuo Fujisawa says, "Websites for the deceased are widespread overseas and have become our main business." Digital graves focus on universal aspects unrelated to

religion, such as memories of the deceased and affection for them.

Digital graves are popular in the United States, partly because bereaved family members and acquaintances live far away and are unable to visit the grave on anniversaries. As an alternative, they visit online digital graves and offer prayers. Furthermore, the widespread use of digital technology has led to an enormous number of photos, videos, and other memories of the deceased, making it difficult to preserve them all on the grave. This has led to a growing demand for digital graves that can store the deceased's vast collection of memories and give them a story. Digital graves are being chosen in the United States for these reasons. "The ease of sharing photos, reading life histories, and forming a community around the deceased is a major advantage," explains President Fujisawa.

Meanwhile, when it comes to funeral DX as a whole, we're still feeling our way around. Remote funerals became popular in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic, but their popularity waned as people began to gather in person.

While the company has been promoting funeral DX in Japan for several years, it notes that there are various differences between the two countries. "We initially entered the Japanese market through B2C, but with many elderly people who are not good with IT and who have strong preconceived notions about physical graves, they tend to be hesitant to go digital. For this reason, funeral DX in Japan will not progress unless it is done through a B2B2C system," says President Fujisawa.

The company is currently working with funeral homes and stonemasons to promote funeral DX. For example, stonemasons are proposing the use of digital graves to customers who wish to close their graves. This service digitizes all information about the graves to be closed and stores it in a registered online cemetery. This service allows visitors to visit the grave simply by accessing it with a QR code, so even those who are not good at IT can use it. "More and more people are closing their graves, but they still feel uncomfortable losing everything, so we see a significant need for at least a digital record," says President Fujisawa. Incidentally, when selling digital graves, it seems that the key to sales promotion is not just digital, but also including some hardware. The company offers a "small grave marker (digital grave)" that can be placed in the home. The design involves displaying a portrait of the deceased in a modern photo frame, and placing the deceased's divided ashes in a casket. A QR code is also attached, which can be used to access the deceased's memories (digital grave). The "small grave marker" is also sold in the United States, but it does not have a function for placing the deceased's

ashes. President Fujisawa says, "I believe that funeral digital transformation will progress in Japan with a hybrid model that combines in-person and online services. It is true that Japanese people's attitudes toward funerals and graves are changing, with the spread of communal graves and scattering of ashes, so I think that over the next 10 years or so, we will see the spread of hybrid models that are smaller, cheaper, and more convenient thanks to digitalization, especially in urban areas."

eco24.com, a funeral service provider, handles everything from funeral arrangements to body transportation and funerals for welfare recipients under the brand name "funeral24.com." They are currently focusing on "natural burial DX," offering a full range of natural burials and digital funeral services. They offer one-stop support from the funeral to burial, scattering of ashes, and memorial services. Simply put, it is a combination of scattering of ashes and a digital grave. President Junichi Kondo said, "Since our founding in 2009, our company has focused on attracting customers online, but the nature of funerals has changed in that time. 'Family funerals' became popular, then 'zero funerals' gained attention, and then the concept of 'natural burials' also emerged. Our company specializes in zero funerals, but with zero and natural burials, there is no grave, so bereaved families have no place to visit. In that case, we could create a digital grave online and make grave visits possible. Zero funerals have a small market share, but there is a need for them, so we began considering them in 2020, anticipating that digital graves would become more widespread to some extent, and released Natural Burial DX in 2022." However, the current situation is one of struggle. While there are positive voices saying, "It will probably become like this in the future," Kondo feels that there are high hurdles to overcome. "Zero and natural burials differ in many ways from traditional funerals, and there are many who view them critically, but we believe that by providing a place for memorial services in the form of a digital grave, such criticism will be alleviated." (President Kondo) At the very least, awareness of digital graves is steadily increasing. For example, when former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was assassinated in July 2022, a digital flower offering project was launched, and many citizens sent flowers and messages. Digital graves can be accessed via QR codes and allow users to offer digital flowers, write messages, and read the deceased's life history. When family members remember the deceased, they can visit the grave from their computers or smartphones at any time and from anywhere.

"Japanese people tend to infuse their remains with their feelings, which can be a hurdle for digital graves. However, for those who choose to scatter the ashes rather than attaching them to the remains, digital graves may be more readily accepted," Kondo said.

This obsession with remains is unique to the Japanese and not seen in other countries. While we occasionally hear of cases of grave robbers stealing remains, the Japanese are so attached to them that they are willing to steal them.

As mentioned above, funerals are currently undergoing a transformation. While various types of funerals have been proposed and there is much talk of diversifying funerals, behind this lies the painful reality of an aging society with a declining birthrate. One reason is that travel is a burden for the elderly, making it difficult for them to attend social gatherings. As a result, there is a growing trend toward not holding funerals, or, if they do, simplifying them.

"The scale of funerals today is completely different from that of funerals from a dozen years ago. Corporate funerals have also declined dramatically. Furthermore, with the COVID-19 pandemic making it commonplace for people to avoid gatherings, funerals will likely continue to decline," says President Kondo, crossing his arms. Incidentally, an increasing number of people are choosing not to visit graves during the Obon season due to the high risk of heatstroke. This, too, is likely a reality of an aging society.

Economic issues are no small matter. The prolonged economic stagnation has made people more frugal, making them less willing to spend money on ceremonial occasions like funerals. In the past, there was a sentiment that tax-deductible funerals would be preferable to paying inheritance tax. However, the number of inheritances that do not necessitate inheritance tax is on the rise, further accelerating the decline in funerals. As more people live longer, the costs of nursing care and other expenses also increase. Surviving family members, who are concerned about their own retirement, have limited funds to spend on the deceased. It seems that financial reasons have made it difficult to maintain graves, leading to an increasing number of cases of people closing them.

"From this perspective, digital graves are well suited to modern people. We would like to first appeal to sensitive urban residents," says President Kondo.

Funeral DX was originally launched with the intention of exploring growth markets. As is well known, the declining birthrate, aging population, and population decline have reduced personal consumption, which accounts for more than half of GDP, making economic growth more difficult than ever. However, as the saying goes, when the wind blows, the barrel maker makes money. We are currently in the midst of an aging society, which is also known as a "society with many deaths." A society with many deaths naturally leads to an increase in funerals. With this simple thought in mind, I assumed the funeral business would be one of the growth drivers, and began my research. This is a common occurrence in research, but as I continued researching, my initial hypothesis

became completely off the mark. The funeral business was a prime example of this. Far from being a growth driver, weddings, funerals, and other ceremonial occasions are becoming increasingly simplified and are facing the misfortune of shrinking. Funerals are at the forefront of this trend. It's common for wakes to be omitted. Corporate funerals are now practically obsolete. Opportunities for Buddhist monks to chant sutras have also drastically decreased. In essence, I was mistaken, but even so, I was repeatedly left dumbfounded by the succession of unexpected events. Having assumed that weddings, funerals, and other ceremonial occasions have been the most important since ancient times and would continue stably regardless of the changing times, I was left speechless. Conversely, this means that the mindset of modern people, for better or worse, is undergoing a dramatic transformation. The sense of crisis among those involved in funerals is growing daily, and new movements are emerging to break the status quo. One of these is funeral DX. While there is active collaboration between IT companies and funeral parlors, the reality is that this is more of a defensive approach to preserving the history, traditions, and culture of funerals than an offensive approach to digital for growth.

Meanwhile, current public opinion is not particularly favorable toward DX funerals. Many people frown upon the idea of digitalizing funerals. It's strange that people don't hold funerals, or at least simplify them, yet are hesitant to digitize them, but perhaps this is where the subtleties unique to the Japanese lie. Japanese people tend to be attached to physical objects, such as cherishing the ashes and keepsakes of the deceased, and an exclusive focus on digital does not resonate with them. Therefore, a hybrid approach that combines the real and the digital will be key to the spread of DX funerals in Japan.

I believe that a hybrid approach will be essential to the spread of DX in Japan, not just for weddings, funerals, and other ceremonies. Perhaps the reason digital hasn't taken hold in Japan is because Japanese sensibilities differ from those of Westerners, who are highly digital-conscious. Japanese people entrust their feelings to various physical objects, and these objects don't necessarily have to be large. Rather, they are attached to small things. Because functionality is crucial for services and solutions, completing them digitally is far more efficient. However, perhaps because they lack a sense of security without physical objects, Japanese people are cautious about services and solutions that they cannot physically touch. Understanding and empathizing with this Japanese sensibility is key to spreading DX throughout society.

Lonely Death and Death with Dignity

When I searched the internet for "lonely death," I found that it described "the death of a person, typically living alone, who dies without anyone present, due to a sudden illness or other cause while living in their own home."

My interest in lonely deaths began when I heard this story from a judicial scrivener who served as a legal guardian in Tokyo. He was the guardian of an elderly woman living in a nursing home in Tokyo. She had a son and daughter, but they were completely estranged from them. She ultimately passed away without her family by her side. The son and daughter had no intention of holding a funeral, saying, "We cut ties with our mother a long time ago, so it's no longer relevant to us." The funeral was held with only the guardian and nursing home staff, and the body was cremated at a crematorium. However, an unexpected surprise occurred shortly thereafter. It was discovered that she had a considerable amount of assets. The guardian had said that both her son and daughter had cut off ties with her, so he intended to donate all of her assets to the Tokyo Metropolitan Government. However, upon hearing of the assets, her son and daughter came to the guardian and claimed their right to inherit. Since they were legally entitled to inherit the estate, the guardian decided to give them the assets and an urn containing their mother's ashes. While the son and daughter readily accepted the assets, they stubbornly refused to accept the urn, insisting, "That's a separate matter." After much discussion, the guardian ended up returning home with the urn, which had nowhere to go. His wife was surprised. Her husband had left for work that morning and returned home that evening carrying an urn of unknown origin. As for the remains, they could not be kept at his home forever, and eventually ended up in a public burial facility in Tokyo. After listening to this story, I immediately asked, "Are your son and daughter gangsters?" "If you only heard what they do, you might think they are, but they are both ordinary citizens. My son works for a reputable company and has a wife and children. My daughter is married and has built a normal family," he answered calmly, without changing his tone of voice.

He has been a guardian for many years, but he says that there are many families where things are far from harmonious, and where there is severe discord.

"When conflicts arise between parents and children or siblings, they inevitably lead to bitter family feuds, and when that happens, it becomes impossible for a third party to deal with," he says, expressing his experience as a guardian.

Listening to this story made me want to know more about modern people's views on life and death. Japanese views on life and death are rapidly changing and are becoming increasingly different from the traditional views held by Japanese people. For example, one of Aesop's most famous fables is "The Ant and the Grasshopper." By contrasting the

hardworking ants with the playful grasshopper, the story encourages a life of steady work and warns against a life of fleeting pleasure. But will this message be conveyed to people whose views on life and death have changed? In the past, most people intuitively understood that the ants were right and the grasshopper was wrong, but if one's view of life and death changes, one can understand that the ants were wrong and the grasshopper was right. That's how much of an impact views on the human psyche have. Today, social problems abound, and misunderstandings are occurring in a variety of areas, but perhaps a shift in views on life and death actually lies behind all of this. Why have views on life and death changed, and where are our views on life and death headed? If we can understand these things, even in a roundabout way, we won't just learn ways to solve social issues, but we might also gain insights into the ideal society and ideal life plans for the next generation.

"The Room Where Time Stood Still" (Hara Shobo) was published in 2019. The author is Miu Kojima, an employee of ToDo-Company, a company that specializes in sorting out personal belongings and specialized cleaning. She joined the company in 2014 and has seen lonely deaths firsthand through her work in sorting out personal belongings and specialized cleaning. "I want more people to know about the reality," she said. Driven by this desire, she began creating miniature replicas of lonely death scenes in 2016. These miniatures garnered attention when they were exhibited at the Ending Industry Exhibition, a funeral industry trade show.

Kojima's miniatures do not recreate actual scenes. Instead, she extracts the characteristics of various scenes and creates a unique piece. "The Room Where Time Stood Still" candidly describes the scenes of lonely deaths alongside photographs of the miniatures she has created.

I met Kojima in February 2020 at the ToDo-Company office. According to Kojima, they usually arrive at the site at 9:30 a.m., finish their work by 2:00 p.m., and head back to the office. They then handle administrative tasks within the company. They begin making miniatures after completing their regular work. On busy days, they handle two estate sorting and special cleaning requests per day. While their company primarily operates in the Tokyo metropolitan area, they also make business trips to other regions. Kojima explains what prompted them to start making miniatures:

"When I talk about lonely deaths, everyone listens. However, I also felt like they had nothing to do with me, and that it was all over the place. That was strange to me. Lonely deaths are not something that only happen to other people; it could happen to your parents, or even to you. I was thinking about what I could do to help people understand

this reality, and I came up with the idea of making miniatures."

He says he absolutely wanted to avoid using photographs. Photos are too graphic, and would instead cause many people to look away. There's also the possibility that the individuals who died alone could be identified, potentially hurting their families. Kojima's idea was simply to convey the reality of lonely deaths, not to recreate the crime scene. The miniatures are merely fictional rooms modeled after the characteristics seen at the scene of a solitary death.

"I first decide on a theme I want to communicate, and then I try to create my work around that theme. Incidentally, I'm currently working on a miniature of a two-family home with the theme of solitary death. I want to convey that even if people live next door to each other, if there is no communication at all, solitary deaths can occur," says Kojima.

It takes about one to two months to complete a miniature. Attention is paid to the details, and for example, the photographs displayed inside the miniature are made from reduced-size copies. Even sweets packaging is given a layer of silver foil on the back to achieve realism. Books, magazines, and convenience store bento boxes are also shaped by applying heat to plastic board (thin plastic sheet). Originally an amateur when it comes to miniature production, Kojima has taught himself the know-how.

"If anything, it seems that people who lived with their families are more likely to die alone. The rooms are quite messy. There are a lot of things inside, and rooms with few things are rare." Having experienced a variety of locations, Kojima shares his impressions of solitary deaths. By gender, the majority of lonely deaths are men. It's said that lonely deaths are common among middle-aged and elderly people who have become single due to divorce or bereavement. The majority of lonely deaths among women occur when their children have left home and they suddenly collapse, leading to delayed discovery. As people age, they inevitably acquire more possessions. Even when they no longer use something, they are reluctant to throw it away, thinking they might need it someday. As a result, their rooms become overflowing with belongings. As people age, back pain, stiff shoulders, and other physical issues can make it difficult to move, and in some cases, even taking out the trash can become difficult. This leads to piles of trash accumulating around the home.

In Japan's aging society, lonely deaths occur in these circumstances. When a lonely death occurs, the next issue is sorting out the deceased's belongings—in other words, cleaning up the room. This role is usually taken on by immediate family. Ideally, there are surviving family members, but sometimes there aren't, and even if there are, they may not want to get involved. In these cases, relatives, and in some cases, distant relatives

who never met the person who died alone, end up cleaning up the room. In fact, it's not uncommon for such distant relatives to request this work.

"When we receive a job request, we first ask the customer to decide on a date for the cleanup. We check the site one week before, prepare an estimate, and inform the customer. Once the customer gives the OK, we begin work," says Kojima.

Clients don't always give the OK. Sometimes they refuse, saying, "I can't afford that kind of money." If the site is a rented condominium or apartment, the landlord or management company will pay for the cleanup. In fact, we often receive requests from landlords and management companies. On the other hand, if the site is a privately owned home, it is often left as is. In extreme cases, it is said to be left unattended for up to 10 years. Modern society is more closed off than we can imagine. In such environments, isolated people with no relatives can pass away without anyone knowing.

Kojima says. "When we're tidying up a room, sometimes we come across a memorial tablet. When we ask the bereaved what they want to do, they sometimes say, 'We don't need it, please throw it away.' But we can't just throw away the memorial tablet. In those cases, we have it cremated at a temple and send a letter to the bereaved informing them that the cremation has taken place." Sometimes remains come up, and in those cases they are deposited in a communal cemetery.

I asked this question about the scene of a solitary death.

"Do you think that when a house is left abandoned for many years and turns into ruins, it becomes a haunted spot or something?"

To this, Kojima replied, "I think those are the rooms of people who were unjustly murdered or committed suicide."

When sorting out belongings and special cleaning services, the site is not limited to rooms where someone has died alone. They also go to murder and suicide scenes.

"A lonely death is when someone who was living a normal life suddenly dies. They may have regrets, but I don't think they harbor any grudges. People who are murdered or commit suicide not only have regrets, but also something like resentment. Even if they die in the same way, the deaths are completely different. You can tell that by the atmosphere of the room," says Kojima.

Incidentally, in rooms where murders have occurred, traces of struggle remain in random places. The rooms of people who have committed suicide often have only the bare minimum of belongings. They likely organize their homes in a planned manner to avoid

causing trouble to those around them.

The volume of work involved in sorting belongings and specialized cleaning varies by season, with January and February being relatively quiet and providing more time for the company.

However, January this year (2020) was apparently busy. They had received numerous requests as early as December of last year. Such a busy January is unusual. There's a strong impression that depression is causing deaths, and in fact, all of the sites in January 2020 were homes of people who died of depression. Before entering a scene, the company makes sure to ask the bereaved and other related parties for detailed information about the type of people living there. However, many bereaved families do not tell the truth. In some cases, they lie and say the deceased died in the hospital, even though the deceased actually died in the room. They may believe that if it's discovered that the deceased died in the room, they can raise the fees for specialized cleaning and other services. Strange bargaining is constant in estate clearance and specialized cleaning work. This bargaining was shocking to Kojima, who was in his early 20s when he first joined the company.

"In a way, it allowed me to see the true nature of people, and it was a valuable life lesson. Before this job, I was a straightforward person who trusted everything without question, but through this work, I learned to look at things from a different perspective," Kojima said.

The actual work of estate clearance and specialized cleaning was completely different from what he had imagined it would be like, and he was constantly surprised by the reality. Before joining the company, he had thought he might see a body at the scene. So he tried to build up his immunity by looking at uncensored photos of corpses on the Internet, looking at ghost photography books, and reading books on estate clearance. However, at an actual crime scene, you almost never see a body. You might find body fragments lying around, but you never see the body itself.

The first crime scene I worked at was an apartment building occupied by an orphan. The hostess of a bar had been a guarantor for the deceased, but she was no longer able to provide guarantees, so the management company called in to sort out the deceased's belongings and provide specialized cleaning.

Kojima describes his impression at the time as follows:

"It was on the third floor of the apartment, and a peculiar smell was leaking outside. I had mixed feelings, wondering if it was the smell of death. Countless German cockroaches were scurrying back and forth in the gaps in the door at the scene. There was no body in the room, but a futon that had absorbed bodily fluids was still there, and the smell was coming from there."

It was a gruesome sight, but I managed to keep calm. For some reason, there were coins lined up in one corner of the room.

"What are these?" I asked my boss, President Masuda Yuji, and he told me, "They're lined up as proof of how many days you've lived." President Masuda has more experience at various sites than Kojima, and is very familiar with the conditions at each site.

The room at the site was littered with pee-filled plastic bottles. Even though a toilet was nearby, it seemed the residents were unable to go there.

"After we finished the work, we had a monk come and perform a purification ritual. I was sprinkling salt in the room alone, praying, 'May I go to heaven,' when suddenly, in the empty room, someone suddenly lifted my hair. It was a kind of paranormal phenomenon, but strangely enough, it wasn't scary. I thought I'd gone to heaven. That was my first site."

Apparently, strange phenomena often occur at the sites, such as strange shadows following people while they're tidying up. However, strangely enough, it's not scary. It's actually the living people that are scary. When working on sorting out belongings and special cleaning, you inevitably see the two sides of people. Some bereaved family members may have been on good terms with the deceased when they died, but when they find out they left no inheritance, they suddenly change and start hurling insults like, "He didn't leave any money behind." Conversely, there are people who had barely any contact with the deceased when they were alive, but when they find out they left an inheritance, they suddenly start praising them.

"When I see scenes like that, I wonder what human life is all about. Sometimes I feel so sorry for someone who worked hard and loved for their family and children in life, only to be treated like this by their family at the very end. But I don't know the family's circumstances. Maybe the person was abusive or domestically abusive in their lifetime. I don't know the circumstances, but when I see bereaved family members speaking ill of the deceased, I just can't help but feel depressed," says Kojima.

There is a passage like this in "The Room Where Time Stopped."

"...They pass by the residence several times and begin to peek inside. Then they barge into the room without permission. These 'friends' have not come to offer their condolences,

nor have they come to help sort through the deceased's belongings."

Their goal is to take away items that can be turned into cash or that they themselves would like to use. Although they are clearly not close to the deceased, they take the items they are after, claiming that they "made a promise with the deceased" or something.

According to the book, at the scene of one lonely death, three men shouted with joy in front of the grieving family, "Wow! This figure could sell for a million!" and then took away any figures they thought could be sold for cash. They took only what they wanted and left without any memories or condolences for the deceased. This passage struck me the most when I read the book, and it's the part I particularly wanted to ask Kojima about in my interview. The reason I wanted to know more about it is because I came across this passage in "Brian Jones: Portrait of a Lonely Rebel" (Mandy Aftel, Shinko Music), which I read in high school: Brian Jones was the guitarist and founder of the British rock band The Rolling Stones. He is said to have drowned in his home pool in July 1969, but his death remains shrouded in mystery. "After Brian died, many of his belongings mysteriously disappeared from the Cotchfield house. Keith recalled, 'I know, everything was stolen. When Mick and I went there to meet him, when word got out that he was leaving, there were a bunch of Arabian screens there, but two weeks later they were gone...'"

When I read this passage, I interpreted the theft of personal belongings as something that only happened when foreign celebrities or wealthy people died, and as something that would never happen in Japan. However, it seems I was wrong.

"I feel like there are a lot of cases of people taking personal belongings without permission in metropolitan housing complexes. When we're sorting through the belongings, people come to check on us, examine the items, and then take them away, saying, 'I was planning to keep this,'" explains Kojima.

It seems like this happens to both men and women," he says.

Apparently, the most common items taken are still usable equipment like televisions and refrigerators, or items that can be converted into money. Most of the time, the people taking them are local residents, but there are also some whose origins are unknown. For example, it's unclear where the three people who stole the figurine mentioned above came from. "Cases of unauthorized theft of personal belongings aren't new; they've been happening since I started this job. It's heartbreaking to think that when I die, strangers might take my belongings. I sometimes think about what I can do now to prevent that from happening," says Kojima.

Suicide is the most common cause of lonely death among young people. Recently, however,

Kojima says, he's been seeing some concerning cases: deaths from starvation. While not extremely common, it's definitely increasing. While sorting through the deceased's belongings and performing specialized cleaning, he begins to realize that the deceased's death isn't typical. These rooms are practically empty. There's no food, and even opening the refrigerator only contains some condiments. As he sorts through the deceased's belongings, he discovers that the deceased had been fired from their company, how long it had been since they last worked, and that they hadn't eaten in ages and rarely went out. He suspects that the deceased died of starvation. It's said that a person will die within three to five days without drinking water. Water is drinkable as long as the water supply is available, so logically, one would need to survive on water alone for several weeks before starving to death.

"However, among those who died from poverty, some had their electricity, water, and gas cut off for about three years. I don't know how they managed to survive. As far as I know, most of those who starved to death were men in their 40s to 60s. One man in his 40s had been a recluse for a long time, and after his parents died, he was no longer able to support himself and starved to death," says Kojima.

In an individualized society like Japan, the proportion of people living alone, regardless of age or gender, is steadily increasing. As a result, the number of lonely deaths will likely continue to increase. Businesses like ToDo-Company, which specialize in estate management and specialized cleaning, have an increasingly important social role, and while there is a desire for additional manpower, in reality, like other industries, they suffer from a chronic labor shortage. In Kojima's words, "It's a world where 99 out of 100 people join." Kojima, who has been with the company for seven years, is second only to President Masuda in seniority. "I'm the only woman here. This job is physical, so there's a lot of coming and going. Many people quit because it's not what they imagined it would be like or they can't stand the stench at the work site," says Kojima.

While the job of sorting out belongings and special cleaning can be broad, the work itself is diverse. Speed is key when working on-site, so you have to be quick and efficient. Work must be completed by 2 p.m., so the atmosphere is always tense. Meanwhile, dealing with customers, including bereaved families, requires a lot of consideration. Requests for work come in constantly. Estimates and other administrative tasks also have to be completed. Holidays are few, and you're lucky to get four or five days off a month.

"It takes a lot of determination to stay in this job. I left my job at the post office to take this job because I wanted to help the families of those who have died alone and to ensure that the deceased can go to heaven in peace," says Kojima.

The most difficult part of the job is removing belongings from the deceased's home.

Sometimes the work site is an apartment building without an elevator. It's especially difficult when two people have to carry out large equipment like commercial refrigerators or washing machines. This is especially difficult if you're on a high floor. Since it's all done manually, it's easy to get a strained back while working.

"At times like that, I wish we had a work robot, so we could carry it out more easily. I've never used a power suit, but even if it reduces the strain on the lower back, I feel like it would make working more difficult," says Kojima.

Heat is also a big enemy. At construction sites, the air conditioner sometimes doesn't work and the windows can't be opened, increasing the risk of heatstroke. Air-conditioned work suits (work suits with fans) have become increasingly common, but they don't work very well when working in enclosed spaces like sorting belongings or specialized cleaning. When the outside air is hot, the heat is blown in, creating sauna-like conditions and apparently making people more susceptible to heatstroke. It seems that a device that efficiently lowers body temperature, such as a neck-cooling cooler, is more effective.

"Some of the worksites have lofts. When piles of trash pile up there, the larger male workers can't work there, so I end up in charge. In the summer, the temperature exceeds 40 degrees. I put ice in towels and wear them around my neck, and I work wearing a gas mask, but the ice melts quickly and the stench is so bad that I can only continue working for 30 minutes at most," says Kojima.

The estate sorting and specialized cleaning industries are chronically short-staffed and have few female staff, but they are also industries that actually require women to play an active role. In specialized cleaning, we not only sort out the rooms of people who have died alone, but also the rooms of women who have become "garbage dumps" due to stalking and other reasons. Malicious stalkers will find out where their target woman is moving and constantly stalk her. Women are constantly under surveillance, and in some cases, their trash is rummaged through and their laundry that they hang outside is stolen. This makes it difficult to throw out trash or wash their clothes. Even if a woman is naturally a neat freak, her room can become overflowing with food waste and dirty clothes, turning it into a garbage dump.

"Women who are being stalked are truly at their wit's end. They have a strong distrust of men, and in many cases, they request that female staff do the work," says Kojima.

When tidying up such a room, it's first necessary to come up with countermeasures against stalkers. The basic approach is to pretend you're moving. Pack your trash into cardboard boxes and throw it away as if you're moving.

"In winter, many people die alone from heat shock in the bathroom, bathroom, or hallway" (a passage from "The Room Where Time Stood Still").

Heat shock occurs when there is an extreme change in blood pressure, such as when suddenly going from a warm place to a cold one, and is common among the elderly. "When people die in the bathroom, they usually don't have a toilet seat cover. They sit on the cold seat and collapse, suffering a myocardial infarction or stroke. Elderly people in particular should be careful when entering the bathroom or toilet area to avoid extreme temperature changes, such as by installing a small heater, using a toilet seat cover, or wearing slippers," says Kojima.

When someone dies in the bathroom, it takes a long time, on average, for two to three months for their death to be discovered. If a person living alone closes and locks the bathroom door, it becomes a completely sealed room, making it difficult for concerned neighbors to notice anything unusual. Bathroom heat shock is likely to occur when someone goes from a cold changing room to a hot bath. In this case, many people lose consciousness and drown. When someone dies in a bathtub, their body decomposes more quickly than usual. This can happen even in the middle of winter.

Kojima, who has witnessed many cases of solitary deaths, spoke about the possibility of preventing them.

"If there were a device like a smartwatch that could sound an alarm or automatically alert the user when the pulse gradually drops, it could detect someone if they collapse in their room early and prevent solitary deaths."

One other option is to install a sensor under the floor that reacts to footsteps and alert the user if there is no reaction for a certain period of time. Of course, the best way to prevent solitary deaths is to live with someone. This is the best way to prevent lonely deaths. However, in today's society, where individualism and privacy consciousness are on the rise, many people choose to live alone, or even find it difficult to survive without being alone. While sharing a room with friends may be exciting and comfortable for younger people, it's rare to hear of middle-aged people doing so. Some elderly people even refuse nursing homes and other facilities, preferring to "retire to a familiar place."

By the way, Kojima's miniatures have garnered attention around the world, having been featured on the BBC in the UK and Al Jazeera in Qatar. He says he's often asked by

foreign journalists, "Why does Japan have lonely deaths? It doesn't exist in my country." Foreign journalists, like their Japanese counterparts, are more or less deceptive and tend to favor their own country, which is probably why they ask such questions. I used to live in the UK, and I still interact with friends and acquaintances, and lonely deaths do occur here. However, perhaps due to the deeply individualistic national character, we don't call it "lonely death." We all die someday. Most of us die alone. Lonely deaths are considered a completely natural occurrence and not much of a problem. In fact, I myself feel a little uncomfortable about making lonely deaths a social issue. If I had to point out one issue with lonely deaths, it would be that it takes time to discover the bodies. If we could implement a system in society that allows for early detection of lonely deaths, most of these issues would be resolved.

Kojima also has this to say:

"It's true that Japan may be making too much of a fuss about it. I don't think it's strange to die alone. I think it's better to enjoy life alone than to force yourself to get married and continue living together with others while experiencing pain. You only live once, so it's up to you which path you choose."

Kojima's miniatures have been acclaimed overseas, but they have also been criticized for making a mockery of the dead. Regarding this point, Kojima says, "In order to avoid exposing the deceased, I decide on a theme I want to convey for each miniature, combine common characteristics of various locations, and use miniatures to represent rooms that don't exist in reality. Many of the people who criticize are conscious of death. Death is scary, after all. That's why they don't want to know. It seems that my work makes people feel like they're being told things they don't want to know. But this is not a time when you can just close your eyes because you don't want to know. The time has come for us to face it."

I visited the scene of a lonely death in June 2020. I accompanied President Masuda and Miss. Kojima to observe the specialized cleaning carried out at an apartment in Tokyo. The on-site interview had actually been requested since February of that year, but was postponed due to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Like many other businesses, sorting out belongings and specialized cleaning services also stalled due to the pandemic. "Work came to a halt from March to May. Especially from April onwards, we received no work requests, and even originally scheduled projects were canceled, resulting in a series of unusual events. Things are gradually returning to normal now, but compared to before, there's still a long way to go," says Miss. Kojima.

The company is also being cautious. They want to avoid the risk of contracting the virus in the room of someone who died of COVID-19. Even more troubling, it's extremely difficult to distinguish between the rooms of people who died of COVID-19 and those who didn't.

Masuda said, "There are cases where the cause of death may be COVID-19. For now, we're avoiding such sites. Before entering a site, I ask about the type of person who lived there, so I think I have a general idea, but there are cases where the family members or management companies don't tell them that the person actually died of COVID-19, so I'm being cautious." According to Masuda, he once performed estate sorting and specialized cleaning at a site where the cause of death was completely unknown, and after the work was completed, he was told, "In fact, the resident of that room had tuberculosis." Family members and management companies generally prefer to keep cases of lonely deaths secret. They're also tight-lipped about the cause of death.

The site I accompanied this time was the room of a man in his 60s who lived alone and died of a myocardial infarction, which was deemed unrelated to COVID-19. It was a sudden request from a management company. Apparently, they had received word of mouth from another management company that had praised Masuda and his team's work. While the company often handles everything from estate sorting to specialized cleaning, this case was a request for specialized cleaning only. It's an unusual case in which the sorting of the deceased's belongings is handled by another company.

Kojima states, "The management company explained that the man was discovered two to three weeks after his death, but judging from the condition of the room, I think it's been two months. The man probably died around April."

Incidentally, the room in question had apparently only been renovated a few months prior. It was properly renovated and rented to the man, but he passed away shortly after moving in. This may be inappropriate, but from the landlord's perspective, who is burdened with the cost of repeated renovations, it's likely he would feel a bit frustrated. Work began at 9:30 AM. The truck was parked in a parking lot near the site, and various work tools were removed and brought to the site. This time, the site was staffed by three people: President Masuda, Miss. Kojima, and a male part-timer. Normally, the work is divided among five to six people, but this time there is no sorting of the deceased's belongings and only specialized cleaning, so it will be a three-person team.

First, President Masuda went around to greet the local residents. Before starting work, they always greet the neighbors. The large number of pests and foul odors have alerted them to the situation, and in some cases, they're extremely irritated. Starting work carelessly under these circumstances can anger them and lead to trouble.

President Masuda and Miss. Kojima joined me in a moment of silence, then entered the room. The stench of death still lingers, so I put on a gas mask. My attire that day was a jacket, T-shirt, and jeans, but I tucked my jacket in my bag. Apparently, the stench of death clings to the body. Apparently, that's how strong the stench of death is. I briefly removed my gas mask and sniffed the room. A faint, unpleasant odor wafted through the air.

"Is this the stench of death?" I asked, and Miss. Kojima nodded.

"Since the personal belongings have been removed, the smell isn't as strong as usual. If futons and other items are still there, the stench becomes very strong," he explained.

This stench of death wasn't something I'd experienced before; I had smelled it somewhere before. However, I couldn't quite remember where it was. As I followed President Masuda, Miss. Kojima, and others as they arranged the work, I wondered, recalling the source of the stench of death I'd smelled somewhere before: "Was it when we were looking at the house we live in now? Or was it in the apartment where I used to live?" Suddenly, a familiar place suddenly occurred to me. When I was moving to my current house, I looked at several properties. Among them was a large, well-located house with affordable rent. The exterior was Western-style, with a large living room on the first floor, two six-tatami rooms on the second floor, and an attic with a skylight. It was a very attractive property, but the management company staff who showed me around were extremely quiet. They wouldn't answer my questions properly. Something seemed strange, so after the viewing, I searched the website "Oshima Teru," which lists properties where people have been found, and found a flame symbol. When I clicked, I saw a note saying "Body Found." I'm sure that house had a strange, foul odor, too. At the time, I didn't think much of it, thinking it was just the stuffy air since it was an old house that had been vacant for nearly a year, but it was the stench of death.

Anyway, the special cleaning that day involved removing the living room floor. This is because a large amount of bodily fluids had been released from the corpse and had seeped into the floorboards below. When this happens, simply cleaning the surface won't eliminate the smell. Special cleaning is a battle against the stench of death. The key to technical success lies in how to eliminate a stubbornly ingrained odor. On the living room floor, there were a group of black dots, forming the shape of a futon. In other words, the deceased had died on the futon that was laid here. The black dots are all bodily fluids.

"This is the head, and these are the feet," Kojima explained, pointing to the black dots. "Before the belongings were sorted out, there was a table here, and there were signs that people had eaten meals there. However, there was no washing machine or television. There was nothing in the closet either, so perhaps the deceased knew that their death

was near." Meanwhile, there were countless yellow dots on the wall, which are said to be the marks left by flies hitting the wall. "After the body was discovered, it would have been best to clean up immediately, but this property had been left abandoned for a long time. As a result, maggots hatched and a huge number of flies appeared. Judging from the marks on the wall, I think there must have been a considerable number of flies," says Kojima. Incidentally, insects present at the scene of a solitary death generally grow to enormous sizes, as they can absorb as much nutrition as they want from the body.

The work begins with disinfection and deodorization. President Masuda sprinkles disinfectant and deodorizing solution, mainly on the floor where the bodily fluids had been found. The smell quickly disappears. According to President Masuda, the disinfectant is highly concentrated and not available on the general market. It is difficult to breathe without a gas mask, and in a closed room, it is so strong that it stings the eyes. Speed is the priority at the scene, and all work is divided among different people. While President Masuda focuses on disinfecting and deodorizing the living room, Miss. Kojima disinfects and deodorizes the kitchen, toilet, and bathroom. Looking into the bathroom, he finds that for some reason water has been left standing there, with flies floating in it. Kojima drains the water and disinfects and deodorizes it. After deodorizing and disinfecting the room, Masuda begins the work of hollowing out the floor, which has been stained with bodily fluids. He uses an electric saw and other tools to carve out the floor. "If the bodily fluids have seeped in this far, they must have dripped down to the floor below, so if we don't hollow out the floor and clean underneath, the smell of death will remain," Masuda says.

The areas stained with bodily fluids have a very strong smell. Masuda continues working, sobbing almost to the point of choking. The floor in this room is particularly hard, and it seems to be difficult to carve out. The area was originally tatami mats, but now it's been replaced with flooring, which has a lot of rhinestones and is sturdier than usual. It's probably even sturdier because the room has just been renovated. After a tough struggle, they finally managed to hollow out the floor, and found black stains stuck to the floor underneath. Sure enough, body fluids had leaked in. There were also fly pupae. The space underneath the floor was also thoroughly disinfected, deodorized, and cleaned. Sooner or later, a construction company will renovate the room. Construction companies are often reluctant to renovate rooms where a body has been found, such as in accident properties. They sometimes refuse work because they don't want to see traces of body fluids. For this reason, companies that specialize in sorting and special cleaning cover even the finer areas, such as underneath the floor.

Body fluids are stubborn, but they come off easily with a special detergent. "This

detergent is our own creation. We created the most effective detergent through trial and error. It is only intended for businesses and is dangerous for general use," explains President Masuda.

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sure that house had a strange, foul odor, too. At the time, I didn't think much of it, thinking it was just the stuffy air since it was an old house that had been vacant for nearly a year, but it was the stench of death.

Anyway, the special cleaning that day involved removing the living room floor. This is because a large amount of bodily fluids had been released from the corpse and had seeped into the floorboards below. When this happens, simply cleaning the surface won't eliminate the smell. Special cleaning is a battle against the stench of death. The key to technical success lies in how to eliminate a stubbornly ingrained odor. On the living room floor, there were a group of black dots, forming the shape of a futon. In other words, the deceased had died on the futon that was laid here. The black dots are all bodily fluids.

"This is the head, and these are the feet," Kojima explained, pointing to the black dots. "Before the belongings were sorted out, there was a table here, and there were signs that people had eaten meals there. However, there was no washing machine or television. There was nothing in the closet either, so perhaps the deceased knew that their death was near." Meanwhile, there were countless yellow dots on the wall, which are said to be the marks left by flies hitting the wall. "After the body was discovered, it would have been best to clean up immediately, but this property had been left abandoned for a long time. As a result, maggots hatched and a huge number of flies appeared. Judging from the marks on the wall, I think there must have been a considerable number of flies," says Kojima. Incidentally, insects present at the scene of a solitary death generally grow to enormous sizes, as they can absorb as much nutrition as they want from the body.

The work begins with disinfection and deodorization. President Masuda sprinkles disinfectant and deodorizing solution, mainly on the floor where the bodily fluids had been found. The smell quickly disappears. According to President Masuda, the disinfectant is highly concentrated and not available on the general market. It is difficult to breathe without a gas mask, and in a closed room, it is so strong that it stings the eyes. Speed is the priority at the scene, and all work is divided among different people. While President Masuda focuses on disinfecting and deodorizing the living room, Miss. Kojima disinfects and deodorizes the kitchen, toilet, and bathroom. Looking into the bathroom, he finds that for some reason water has been left standing there, with flies floating in it. Kojima drains the water and disinfects and deodorizes it. After deodorizing and disinfecting the room, Masuda begins the work of hollowing out the floor, which has been stained with bodily fluids. He uses an electric saw and other tools to carve out the floor. "If the bodily fluids have seeped in this far, they must have dripped down to the floor below, so if we don't hollow out the floor and clean underneath, the smell of death will remain," says Masuda.

Part A, where the bodily fluids have seeped in, has a very strong smell. Masuda continues working, sobbing almost to the point of choking. The floor in this room is particularly hard, and it seems that he is having a hard time hollowing it out. The area that was originally tatami has been replaced with flooring, so there are many rafters and it is sturdier than usual. It is probably even sturdier because the room has just been renovated. After a tough struggle, they finally managed to hollow out the floor, and found black stains stuck to the floor underneath. Sure enough, body fluids had leaked in. There were also fly pupae. The space underneath the floor was also thoroughly disinfected, deodorized, and cleaned. Sooner or later, a construction company will renovate the room. Construction companies are often reluctant to renovate rooms where a body has been found, such as in accident properties. They sometimes refuse work because they don't want to see traces of body fluids. For this reason, companies that specialize in sorting and special cleaning cover even the finer areas, such as underneath the floor.

Body fluids are stubborn, but they come off easily with a special detergent. "This detergent is our own creation. We created the most effective detergent through trial and error. It is only intended for businesses and is dangerous for general use," explains President Masuda.

At the end of July 2020, President Masuda, Miss. Kojima, and others conducted a special cleaning and sorting service at a location in Tokyo. The site of the cleaning was a room on the fourth floor of a five-story apartment building. A 50-year-old man who lived alone had died alone. Nothing is known about the deceased except that he died of a myocardial infarction. The apartment building is made of reinforced concrete and is approximately 40 years old. There is no elevator. The cleaning service was a corner room on the fourth floor (6-tatami mat Japanese-style room, 3-tatami mat kitchen). At 9:30 AM, President Masuda, Miss. Kojima, and five other male staff members gathered in a parking lot near the site.

"Seven of us will be working today. We increased the number of staff members because the work involves going up and down stairs," said President Masuda.

The weather that day was light rain. Perhaps due to the prolonged rainy season, the temperature was 26-27°C, cool for Tokyo at this time of year.

This was a typical scene of a solitary death. It was a typical middle-aged man's apartment, and his belongings remain untouched. However, we don't know many details,

such as what kind of work the deceased did, how long they lived in the apartment, or what kind of lifestyle they led. This is because there was trouble between the deceased's family and the landlord, making it difficult to ask about the deceased's background. It appears that the landlord fraudulently charged the family for renovations, and the angry family is reportedly planning to hire a lawyer and sue the landlord. Meanwhile, the landlord claims that he only followed the renovation contractor's instructions and requested the payment. It appears he wants no further involvement in the matter. President Masuda and his team undertook the estate sorting and specialized cleaning at the request of the family.

We prepared our work tools in the space on the first floor of the apartment. A foul odor was already lingering in the air at this point. Miss. Kojima greeted the landlord, who lives on the second floor, before the start of work, and the entire staff headed to the site on the fourth floor. Since the neighbors were not home, there was no pre-work greeting. Ms. Kojima clasped her hands at the door, slowly opened the door, and entered the room. I tried to follow her, but it was impossible. The stench was unbearable. This was truly unimaginable. It was thick and poisonous, and I felt as if I was being pushed back by the suffocating pressure of the air. The stench was so strong it ripped through my very being. I quickly went outside, wrapped a towel over the mask I was wearing, and re-entered the room, holding my breath. Squinting, I took my camera at random. When I partially opened my eyes, I was left speechless by the sight of the room. There was so much garbage strewn about that I couldn't even step. It was a typical garbage house. I started to feel short of breath, so I went outside again to catch my breath, then returned to the room and took the picture. I was forced to repeat this process several times. The unique stench, a mixture of the stench of death and rotting food waste, was so offensive it could be described as murderous.

Meanwhile, Kojima paid no attention to my hesitation and continued to disinfect every corner of the room.

"This is what they call a garbage house, isn't it?" Finally calming down, I asked Kojima if he'd developed an immunity from repeatedly going in and out, or if the stench had faded due to the effects of the disinfectant and deodorizing agents.

"That's true," Kojima replied lightly as he sprayed the disinfectant and deodorizing agent over him. However, he was constantly blinking his eyes, which were tearing up. He wasn't crying; the chemical reaction between the disinfectant and deodorizing agent and the stench of death was stinging his eyes terribly.

"I wonder how he managed to live amongst all this garbage," I asked, to which Kojima replied, "I think he was probably living on top of the garbage."

"If he died suddenly, where in this room did he die...?" I asked. "I think it's where Kitajima is standing now. There's a thick layer of bodily fluids on the tatami mat."

Looking closely at my feet as he pointed this out, I saw a thick, dark stain smeared on the trash-strewn tatami mat.

"I think they've probably been bothered by pests since they moved in. So many cockroaches. It's amazing," Kojima muttered to himself. Looking around the room, he saw countless insecticides scattered everywhere.

After the room had been disinfected and deodorized and the stench had subsided, a male staff member went up to the room and began stuffing every last bit of trash into garbage bags. From the six-tatami Japanese-style room to the three-tatami kitchen, every space was filled with trash, and President Masuda, Kojima, and five other male staff members silently cleared it away. Large, bulging garbage bags piled up on the apartment's landing. The male staff carried them up to the first floor. There was no elevator, so they had no choice but to use the stairs. They repeatedly carried the garbage bags up and down the stairs. The garbage bags continued to pile up in the space below. Around 10:00 a.m., a waste collection truck arrived in front of the apartment building. A male staff member loaded the garbage bags from the lower floors into the truck's loading compartment. Staff stuffed all the trash from the room into garbage bags, others carried them downstairs, and still others loaded the garbage bags downstairs onto the garbage truck. The work gradually became a coordinated effort. The mountains of trash that had been scattered everywhere were gone, and the room looked much neater. Although it was tidy, it was still full of trash, but at least it was still a "room" and not a "garbage house." Inside the room, the tatami mats were being removed. First, the tatami mats soaked with bodily fluids were peeled off. The removed tatami mats were placed in 300-size plastic bags and removed. The first break was taken an hour after work began. Working in the summer also means battling heatstroke. Frequent breaks and hydration are essential.

According to Kojima, a recent trend is that bodies are being discovered earlier.

"When I joined the company around 2014, it was common for bodies to be discovered more than six months after death. However, recently, bodies are being discovered within a few weeks. Perhaps the reason they're being discovered earlier than in the past is because the reality of lonely deaths has become more widely known. Lonely deaths have become more common, and people are becoming more careful," he says.

This was my second time attending a lonely death scene, and both times the deceased was male. It could be said that I happened to encounter a male lonely death, but it seems certain that more men than women die alone.

Regarding this point, Kojima says, "My impression from seeing the scenes is that men

lead more chaotic lives. Many women don't drink or smoke, but men living alone, in particular, have a poor diet due to alcohol and tobacco."

Apparently, men also have more garbage houses. Moreover, they are quite different from women's garbage houses. Women's garbage houses are a little tidier and don't have as many pests. When we say a room is dirty, we are referring to dried clothing and other items scattered around (this applies only to women in their 20s and 30s). Meanwhile, the men's messes are far more gruesome, with everything from food waste to urine-filled bottles scattered everywhere, and excrement left in plastic bags. "While there was no urine or excrement at this particular scene, it's common. Even though the toilet in the room is only a few steps away, many men find it too much of a hassle," says Kojima.

The cleaning of the room continues after the break. In addition to clearing out the trash, we sort through recyclable items and potential personal effects like documents and photographs. As we proceeded with this sorting process, the identity of the deceased gradually began to emerge. What particularly caught my attention was a chemical called "Argamate Jelly" scattered around the room. An online search revealed that this drug maintains a constant level of potassium in the blood, slowing the progression of chronic kidney failure and preventing complications. High blood potassium levels can lead to arrhythmia and, in the worst case, cardiac arrest. Argamate Jelly may have been essential for the deceased, who is believed to have died of a myocardial infarction. Even so, the amount of medication is overwhelming. How on earth was he taking it?

Normally, the trash removal process is completed in the morning. This time, however, it took a little longer due to the large amount of trash and the need to search for important documents and other personal belongings. President Masuda and his team try to finish the work by 2:00 p.m. Regarding this point, Kojima says, "It's less stressful to clean up all at once than to drag it out until the evening. Also, sometimes the family members are present at the site. They often travel far away by train or plane, so we try to finish the work as quickly as possible so they can go home that same day."

As the room was tidied up, various personal belongings began to appear.

"Kitajima-san, take a look at this," President Masuda called out to me. I followed his instructions and looked into the closet, where I found a pile of expensive-looking miniature cars. They were what you might call "treasures." There were over a dozen miniature cars, each worth tens of thousands of yen, stored in the closet. They must have

been very precious. In a room full of trash, the miniature cars were the only things neatly stored in boxes.

"Everyone keeps their valuables and important things stored away," Masuda said.

"Was this hidden because it was important?" I asked, to which Masuda replied, "No, I wasn't hiding it, I just put it away. Hidden things usually turn up in unexpected places, like between clothes. In the past, hidden things would often turn up when sorting through belongings, but that's become less common these days."

Masuda carefully searched through the closet, sorting out valuables and important documents.

"Ah, so this person was continuing to receive welfare benefits while receiving employment support. That's a typical example."

In his work sorting and special cleaning, he says he often encounters such scenes. In other words, it gives him a glimpse into the way the deceased lived their life. Some people abuse laws and systems to obtain unfair income. In the case of welfare recipients, some are able to work but resort to various methods to earn money without working. All of this money is paid for with taxpayers' money. There's no way to confirm how the deceased ended up on welfare. There may have been unavoidable circumstances, but the expensive miniature car and the pornographic magazines and DVDs scattered around the room were hardly necessities. At least to me, they didn't seem like items that should have been purchased with other people's tax money. There are scholars and journalists out there who criticize the government's economic policies and encourage people to apply for welfare. Of course, welfare is a social safety net, and it's only natural that those who need it should use it. However, we must not forget that its source is our taxpayers' money. Looking at the expensive miniature cars and pornographic magazines scattered around the room, I felt conflicted. Suddenly, I glanced at the calendar on the wall, and for some reason, it was for 2015. Perhaps the deceased's time had stopped in 2015.

While I continued sorting through the deceased's belongings, I stuffed the remaining trash into garbage bags. The scrap truck was due to leave at 1 p.m., so I had to clear out the trash before then. After clearing out the trash, I vacuumed and wiped the floor. It was as if the messy house had been pristine. The gloomy, dimly lit room suddenly became bright.

"With this much cleanup, we can rent the room to someone else," President Masuda muttered.

Once the room was scrubbed, President Masuda prepared bells and incense to mourn the deceased. All the staff, including myself, joined hands in prayer.

The final step was to use an ozone deodorizer, but before that, we sprayed on a

fumigation-type pesticide. It was similar to Balsan, but for professional use, so it was stronger. That's how many cockroaches are still wriggling around in the room. With permission from the landlord, the ozone deodorizer will be running for a few days. "We've sprayed disinfectant and deodorizer, so the smell of death has been temporarily suppressed, but it still lingers quite a bit," says Kojima. The work finished just after 2pm. There was a light rain, and the weather was cool for midsummer, but working in a sweltering, stench-filled room was harder than one would imagine. Kojima kept pouring bottled water over his face and head to wash away the constant sweat.

As a journalist, I have visited many different locations. During the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011, I traveled to affected areas and interviewed engineers on the front lines working to restore communications. I also visited the affected areas during the 2016 Kumamoto earthquake. During the 2018 Western Japan heavy rains, I traveled to affected areas such as Okayama, Hiroshima, and Ehime to report on efforts to restore communications. All of these were harsh locations that vividly demonstrated the ferocity of nature. I felt nothing but respect for the engineers on the front lines of restoration efforts in such challenging conditions. Having seen so many different locations, I was confident that I could watch over even the most challenging situations without hesitation.

I also reported on two locations where people had died alone. Both were apartment buildings in Tokyo. While these were different types of locations from natural disasters, they were comparable in terms of severity. I didn't intend to be intimidated, but I was quite taken aback. The scenes of these solitary deaths were so gruesome. First of all, there was the stench. During the Great East Japan Earthquake, the tsunami flooded the city, and even after the waters receded, the smell of fishy seafood lingered for some time. However, a different stench permeated the scenes of solitary deaths: the stench of human death. It's a thick, thick, strangely sticky, pungent odor—a stench so strong it's hard to put into words, even a slight sniff can make you nauseous. The main cause of the stench of death is decaying bodily fluids. At the scene, dark, coagulated fluids permeate the floor and tatami mats, making them difficult to dispel. The stench of death permeates the room, even seeping into the air conditioner. And then there are pests. At the scene I visited, insecticide had been sprayed beforehand, and pests had been mostly eliminated, but there were countless dead flies floating in the bath water, tons of dead maggots mixed in with the bodily fluids, and stubborn cockroaches squirming all over the room. I was also overwhelmed by the mountains of garbage. There were so many piles of garbage that it was impossible to imagine how people had been living there. I've seen scenes of

garbage houses on television and in magazines many times, but the real thing is several times more intimidating.

The exact number of solitary deaths in Japan is unknown. Several statistical data have been released, but they are all just the tip of the iceberg and lack credibility. For example, the government's first estimate of solitary deaths in April 2025 put the figure at 21,856 in 2024. Of those, 17,364 were men, accounting for 80%. The actual number is likely several times higher. Solitary deaths, especially in urban areas, are likely more common than we imagine. We enjoy comfortable urban lives, but we may actually be living side by side with dead bodies without even realizing it.

Abandoning bodies causes various problems. It's unhygienic, as a practical matter. Viruses thrive in unsanitary environments. An environment where the bodies of people who have died alone are left abandoned for long periods of time would be a paradise for viruses. Further complicating the issue of solitary deaths is the rise of individualism. As society matures, the lifestyles of its people unfold within their own closed spaces. As individualization progresses, personal satisfaction becomes the basis of thought, and privacy becomes increasingly important. While people don't ignore their neighbors or others, they don't allow others to intrude on their privacy and avoid touching on the privacy of others, ultimately weakening human relationships. These characteristics of modern people make them more likely to die alone. Individuals who are mentally and physically healthy and active on their own initiative feel fulfilled. However, if something causes them to lose their energy and stamina and they can no longer function as they wish, they suddenly become reckless and impoverished.

Here's an anecdote. It was in 2020. He was an editor. He edited poetry collections and had connections with numerous poets. Although he was single, he was immersed in the work he loved and felt extremely fulfilled. He said he never felt lonely. He remained active even after turning 70, until he fell ill and had to undergo surgery. However, the surgery was unsuccessful, leaving him bedridden and forcing him to give up his editing job. He now lives alone, bedridden all day. He still has financial means, so a caregiver comes to care for him once or twice a week. These are essentially the only times he interacts with other people. He'd never felt lonely before, but now he's desperately longing for company. While cash is a given, to me this episode seems like a perfect example of how people live today. He's prepared to die alone. Regular visits from a caregiver likely avoid the tragedy of his body being left unattended for an extended period, but with no family to call his own, the only option is to die alone. This is the fate of a man who was bustling about with energy just a few months ago. How many people

today can sneer at his life and dismiss it as his own doing?

Lonely deaths are a more common occurrence than we might imagine. The quickest way to eliminate lonely deaths is to cherish our families and maintain ties with our communities. One can imagine, but to what extent will this solution really work in modern Japan? For many Japanese, ties to family and community have become like unattainable luxuries.

"(Omitted) Because what resembled 'community' has collapsed, we are no longer collectivist or individualistic in the proper sense, and are stuck vacillating between the two. This can only be interpreted as a manifestation of a 'void', a loss of faith in any value, whether 'individual' or 'collective'."

This is a passage from Kyoto University Professor Saeki Keishi's book "Anti-Happiness Theory" (Shincho Shinsho), which points out that one of the factors that led to this situation in Japan was the mistaken belief in postwar values that the more "individual freedom" expanded, the better, and that the more "economic wealth" expanded, the better. It seems that these values became more pronounced in the late 1980s. While corporate organizations have been criticized for being collectivist, the book argues that the concentration of people and money in big cities through the Large Retail Store Law and residential development has resulted in the collapse of local communities and a loss of national values. However, what must be emphasized here is who is responsible for the destruction of families, communities, and so-called communities? It was the Japanese people themselves. It was not a conspiracy by the United States or China, nor a ploy by the Japanese government. Community collapsed as a result of actions taken by Japanese people with good intentions.

The word "community" sounds light and pleasant to the ear, but in Japan, community ultimately refers to a village society. An exclusive group bound by irrational rules, opaque and dominated by strange vested interests. This is my image of village society. It's quite negative. There would be strong, unavoidable human relationships, so loneliness would be rare, but I would rather be alone than live shivering in such a group. Even if it's cold, harsh, or leads to an early death, a space with rational rules and high transparency gives a sense of purpose.

After the war, many Japanese people turned their backs on this traditional village society and sought a space with rational rules and high transparency. Many Japanese people, including myself, thought that this was the right choice. However, a side effect of making the right choice was the concentration of people in cities and the collapse of families and communities. If families and communities collapse because of wrong or bad behavior, correcting that behavior will restore them. However, many Japanese people

are not aware that they are behaving wrong or badly. When families and communities collapse despite being on the right path, they become unsure of what to do and how to correct it. Perhaps the "emptiness" that Saeki points out arises from this anguish.

In this emptiness, people begin to pursue "small personal happiness." This is a worldview close to aestheticism, which places the highest value on the enjoyment and creation of beauty. Replace "beauty" with "personal preference" and you've got a typical modern Japanese person. When we place the highest value on the enjoyment and formation of personal preferences, it's inevitable that we become more conscious of privacy.

In addition to this social environment, our aging society is becoming increasingly prevalent. The number of people dying alone is only increasing, not decreasing. Lonely deaths are now a common outcome that can happen to anyone. It's not a nuisance for special people. Simply knowing this could help to reduce discrimination and prejudice against lonely deaths and ease the mental burden on bereaved families and those involved.

"It's become less common these days, but not long ago, when we said we were cleaning out the room of someone who had died alone, people would avoid us, saying, 'It's bad luck, so stay away,'" recalls President Masuda.

The rooms of people who had died alone were once called "property with a problem" or "property with a bad reputation." In short, those who died alone were seen as social outcasts, scoundrels, and scoundrels. Even now, there's a tendency to equate a room where someone has died alone with a property where someone has died alone. However, understanding the reality of lonely deaths will help to dispel this perception and make it easier to create solutions to prevent lonely deaths. Rental property screening is becoming stricter every year. For example, elderly people have a hard time finding a place to live. This trend is particularly pronounced in urban areas. Behind this lies the sharp increase in lonely and suspicious deaths among the elderly. According to a real estate agency in the Tokyo metropolitan area, lonely deaths occur at a rate of one per week in properties managed by the company. While the company's employees regularly patrol the property to prevent these incidents, their effectiveness has been limited. It's only natural that real estate agents in this situation would be cautious about the elderly. However, the increasing number of elderly people unable to rent a room is a major social issue in Japan, a country in the midst of an aging society. Currently, children and grandchildren living in urban areas often invite elderly relatives living in rural areas to live in urban areas. While it would be one thing if relatives lived with their children or grandchildren, it seems that recently, many elderly people prefer to live alone in their neighborhoods rather than with their children or grandchildren. While this provides a

glimpse into the deepening privacy awareness of modern Japanese people, in reality, strict screening for tenants often hinders their wishes. From this perspective, too, solutions to prevent lonely deaths are needed. If the problem of lonely deaths were alleviated, it would be easier for elderly people to rent rooms, and real estate agents would be able to expand their business.

So what kind of solutions would be effective? One would be a solution that would allow a third party to quickly detect any abnormalities in the room and respond before they become serious. The biggest problem with lonely deaths is that the body is often left undiscovered after the death. After about two days, the body begins to decompose, and bodily fluids begin to drip. This creates a stench of death that fills the room. It seeps into the walls, air conditioner, and even under the floorboards. Furthermore, insects swarm around the bodily fluids and multiply rapidly. Flies and cockroaches take over the room, further worsening the devastation. When this happens, specialized cleaning is the only way to restore the space to one fit for human habitation.

Kojima explains:

"Rooms where a body is discovered quickly require less work. If the fatigue level of working at a site where a body is not found for a long time is 120%, then the fatigue level of working at a site where a body is found early is about 85%."

Rooms where a body has been left for a long time require special cleaning in addition to regular cleaning, which is physically and mentally exhausting. On the other hand, if the body is discovered early and there is no odor or body fluids, the work is not much different from regular sorting. All that is required is disinfection services in addition to sorting. In other words, simply detecting lonely deaths in advance and responding quickly can reduce the burden on many involved parties.

The smart city concept is gaining attention. A smart city is a futuristic city that uses digital and other advanced technologies to improve and enhance social and lifestyle infrastructure, thereby improving people's standards of living and achieving sustainable economic development. It could be said to be the best path to recovery for Japan, which is suffering from a serious decline in its birthrate, aging population, and population decline. Currently, attention is focused on visually appealing visions such as smart working and smart living. However, I believe the true value of smart cities lies in making visible, consolidating, and resolving hidden issues throughout society. Lonely deaths are one example. Digitalizing entire cities through smart cities will facilitate indoor sensing, enabling early detection and response to abnormalities. While it may be impossible to

reduce lonely deaths, a smoother response afterward can minimize their impact.

"Designing a Declining Population Society" (by Yoshinori Hiroi, published by Toyo Keizai Inc.) includes a chapter titled "Reconstructing Views on Life and Death." According to statistics from the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research and others, the annual number of deaths from the 1950s to the 1970s was approximately 700,000. However, after 2000, it exceeded 1 million annually and is expected to increase to 1.7 million by around 2040. After that, it is expected to gradually decrease. Incidentally, as of 2025, it is around 1.4 million. Looking at these figures, we can see that we live in a society with a high death rate. It's no wonder that our views on life and death are changing. It seems as though death is so close to us that we've developed a strange immunity to it, becoming insensitive to it.

I believe this insensitivity to death is driving two trends in modern society. One is solitary death. Specifically, the neglect of solitary death. Perhaps death is so commonplace that people have become as indifferent to it as they are to water and air. The other is the dream of immortality. In addition to physical immortality based on life sciences and advanced medical care, attention is also being drawn to immortality of the mind through digital applications. The idea is that human consciousness can be digitized and transplanted onto the internet, allowing us to live forever. The book argues that postwar Japan's goal was economic growth and the expansion of material wealth, and as a society, it has steadily climbed the slope of upward mobility, progress, and growth, ignoring the aging and death that lie beyond. However, in today's society with a high death rate, it is no longer possible to ignore aging and death. Or perhaps it is precisely because of this high death rate that people are deliberately trying to put aging and death out of their sight. It's the idea of trying to bury something unpleasant. But we are no longer in a situation where we can just bury the issue and let it go. Whether we like it or not, we must face a society with a high death rate.

Japanese views on life and death will likely undergo a rapid transformation. From a view that places death outside of our sight to one that confronts it head-on. According to a survey by the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, the proportion of single-person households in 2018 was 27.4%, second only to married-couple households (32.3%). As long as this trend continues, the number of lonely deaths will continue to increase.

I will probably die alone, too. Still, I don't lament my fate. I'm not trying to act tough or anything; I'm happy to die alone. It would be innocent to die in peace, without worrying about anyone else, as the king of my heart. Sometimes I fantasize about how I will die. "Someone suddenly collapses while walking down the street and dies there. With no one to call their own, they are administratively disposed of and thrown into a public

cemetery." Or "Someone drinks heavily on a cold winter's night in Sapporo, falls asleep in the snow, and freezes to death." None of these are good ways to die, but I have such low expectations of the world. That's why I can accept the possibility of dying alone.

Live as long as you can and die in the city, freeze to death in the snow, or die in your room, because that's your destiny. On the other hand, I can't bear the thought of a body being left alone for a while after death to rot, stink, and become prey to vermin. While the dead are silent, and it's none of our business what happens after death, I would prefer to avoid causing inconvenience or discomfort to those around me. That's why I believe that leaving a body lying around for long periods, as is common in cases of solitary death, is a serious problem. No matter how much the times change, society exists for the sake of the living, and the impact of death should be minimized. It is unacceptable for society to malfunction due to an increase in the number of deaths.

I believe that the only way to survive as individualized people in a society with a declining birthrate and an aging population, and a society where people are isolated, is to adopt the motto of "don't be dragged down, don't be dragged down." Furthermore, recently I have come to believe that without the "courage to abandon, and the resolve to be abandoned," society cannot be sustained in the future.

Science and Technology that Enables Excessive Life Extension

When searching for "death with dignity" online, I found the following: "Death with dignity refers to a person facing death with dignity and is considered a form of informed consent. It is closely related to euthanasia and refusal of resuscitation." Since it's closely related to euthanasia, the two terms have different meanings. When searching for euthanasia online, I found the following: "Death with dignity refers to the process of causing death to a person or animal without causing pain. It is generally used to refer to medical treatment for terminally ill patients." Another description states that "death with dignity" is another term for euthanasia. David Goodall, an Australian environmentalist and botanist who worked for a pro-euthanasia organization and was euthanized in Switzerland, apparently defines death with dignity as "the freedom to choose death at the appropriate time."

I've only become interested in death with dignity and euthanasia in the past few years. While not long ago, we were talking about the "era of 80-year lifespans," we've now seen the emergence of the "era of 100-year lifespans." Without even realizing it, our life expectancy has been extended by 20 years. The expression "the 100-year lifespan"

became popular around 2017, when the government launched the "Council for Designing a 100-Year Lifespan."

While some people are excited about the idea of a 100-year lifespan, many are saddened by its reality. To be honest, I'm devastated. If we compare life to a full marathon, in the "80-year lifespan era," I'm past the halfway point and approaching the 30-kilometer mark. It's a tough stretch, but if I push forward just a little more, the finish line is within sight. I motivate myself, knowing that this is the crucial moment, to keep running, only to be suddenly told, "We're now in the 100-year lifespan era, so the finish line is still a long way off." This announcement is a real blow to my exhausted mind and body. Still, I have no choice but to run, so I keep running as hard as I can, but gradually, I begin to have a tinge of doubt. "Before we know it, we'll be moving toward a '120-year lifespan' and then a '150-year lifespan'. It's impossible to plan your life this way."

One day, as I was absentmindedly pondering what the 100-year lifespan will be like, I noticed a poster. It was a poster for the House of Councillors election.

"Is this the Association for Considering Euthanasia...?" I stopped in my tracks and read the message on the poster. It included appeals such as, "I want to decide my own end," "People who don't want to use the system can just ignore it," "I don't want to prolong my life so much that it causes unbearable pain and suffering," and "Having it as an option in life gives me peace of mind, like a 'lucky charm.'" More and more people will likely sympathize with this way of thinking. However, euthanasia can also be viewed as suicide, so there are sure to be many who are hesitant to consider it. It's a controversial topic, but one that cannot be avoided when considering the 100-year lifespan.

I was able to interview Sano Hidemitsu, the representative of the Association for Considering Euthanasia. Sano ran in the 2019 House of Councillors election, and although he missed out on a seat, he achieved some success, winning 269,062 votes in the proportional representation section. I wanted to hear what kind of feedback the group has received regarding its efforts, including voter reactions during the election campaign.

"I've hardly ever heard any negative comments. I've received support, but never any criticism... In fact, I'd like to hear opposing opinions, so I ask people I meet to tell me if they know anyone who is against euthanasia," Sano says nonchalantly.

The group receives many phone calls and emails every day. Apparently, they sometimes receive more than 3,000 calls in a single day. Most of these are messages of support from elderly women, calling for the creation of a euthanasia system. They also receive voices saying that someone needs to speak out. Sano says he can feel the high level of public

interest firsthand.

"When I give street speeches, people stop to listen, and sometimes they'll applaud me and ask to shake my hand."

It is said to be well-received in wealthy areas such as Jiyugaoka and Denenchofu.

Various movements regarding euthanasia have been taking place, particularly in Europe. The Netherlands enacted its "Euthanasia Law" in 2001, followed by Belgium in 2002 and Luxembourg in 2008. Switzerland is particularly advanced, even accepting euthanasia for foreigners. In fact, some Japanese people have undergone euthanasia in Switzerland. Looking back on the election campaign, Sano says, "Medical professionals were extremely cooperative." He says medical professionals from all over the country, from Hokkaido in the north to Kyushu in the south, volunteered to support the campaign, putting up campaign posters and driving campaign cars. Due to the nature of their work, medical professionals are forced to witness the scene of death. They have a realistic understanding of what human death is like. They are more sensitive to death than the general public.

"Due to their position, it is difficult for them to openly advocate for dignified death or euthanasia. However, they understand our efforts more than anyone else and actively support them," Sano says.

Many medical professionals today are struggling with a major dilemma. Patients beg for immediate demise, while hospitals instruct them to continue life-prolonging treatment. Some supporters of euthanasia express outrage, saying, "I cannot tolerate the management culture of hospitals that suck every last bit of life out of patients, squeezing money out of them right up until the moment of death."

However, while this may be a self-serving move, the economic benefits of euthanasia cannot be ignored. Many elderly people want to spend their money doing what they want, knowing that their life is precious, but they feel hesitant because they don't know how long they will live. Sano believes, "Rather than holding back and avoiding spending money, being able to do what you want to do to the fullest would be more beneficial to seniors' quality of life." If this results in increased consumption, that is a good thing.

Sano commented on the current situation, "I sense a movement (for euthanasia). Many people are interested, but they just aren't able to take the initiative." The association does not set standards for euthanasia. In other words, they want to make euthanasia available to anyone who wants it, regardless of age, gender, or whether they have an illness or not. Setting half-hearted conditions would stall the movement. In other words,

it would fall into the typical trap of agreeing in principle but opposing the details, and opposition to each individual condition would continue to erupt endlessly.

"The individual's wishes should be respected. That's all. I believe that as long as the euthanasia system is in place, it doesn't have to be used. If the system itself can provide peace of mind and encourage people to try a little harder, suicides will likely decrease," says Sano.

There are many religions in the world, divided into countless sects. Buddhism, even the major ones, has dozens of sects. Doctrines also differ between sects. Among these, the Soto sect is based on the principle of leaving it up to the individual's will. However, this does not mean leaving people to their own devices; rather, it means respecting their wishes after gaining a wide range of knowledge and information and considering what the truth is.

"From that perspective, we are extremely opposed to dignified death and euthanasia. We take the position of questioning whether this is really okay," says Furuyama Kenichi, associate senior researcher at the Department of Contemporary Teaching Research at the Soto Zen Research Center.

The basis of Buddhism is non-killing. It takes the position that all lives have the same value. If this interpretation of dignified death and euthanasia is stretched too far, it could lead to the idea that those who have no point in living should die. External pressure will also arise. Even if one claims it is one's own will, there is no guarantee that there are no invisible influences.

"We believe that our role is to sound the alarm about these dangers," says Furuyama.

The Soto Zen sect respects individual will, but at the same time, there is also a tendency to view individual will skeptically. Behind this lies in introspection, based on the Buddhist view of truth, asking, "Is my life really my own?" Buddhism takes the position that one's life does not belong to oneself and does not belong to anyone else. This is understood as "everything is empty" or "the life of the Buddha."

Furuyama says, "Rather than viewing dignified death, euthanasia, and suicide as evil, I place importance on questioning the logic of whether one can dispose of something that does not belong to oneself."

There was a situation similar to dignified death and euthanasia in the time of the Buddha. Wanting to relieve a person suffering from unbearable pain, one of the Buddha's disciples instructed those around him to "put the person at ease," and had the person drink poison. This could be considered an episode equivalent to euthanasia, but the Buddha deemed it an act of murder.

"In Buddhism, life is given the utmost respect. Behind this lies the Buddhist philosophy that life has no owner," says Furuyama.

Buddhism values compassion. Compassion means providing as much relief as possible to those in pain and supporting them until they can reach a natural end.

Uno Masatoshi, a senior researcher at the Soto Zen Research Center, who is involved in support activities for the bereaved families of suicides, explains: "Even if you are suffering, anxious, or lonely, this does not mean that you have an obligation to live alone until you die. It is truly a sign of compassion, and by alleviating the circumstances that make life difficult, we want to support each other so that, when you reach your final moments, you can think, 'I'm glad I was able to live.' That is the way society is, and that is the way human beings are, from a Buddhist perspective."

Uno also points out that in a society where individual decision-making is respected, there are major problems behind the decision to live or die.

"As an individual, why do you want to die? What is enough when you say you've done everything you could? This is a very important point. There is anxiety involved. I think people want to choose death because they are worried that they will no longer be needed by society, or that they will be shunned. In that sense, there is anxiety behind calls for dignified death and euthanasia, and to me it sounds like a cry of despair," says Uno.

Dignified death and euthanasia are not just issues for the individual themselves, but also have a significant impact on their family and relatives. In reality, it is not something that can be resolved by the individual making the decision.

"When it comes to the issue of suicide, the surviving family members feel great regret and guilt for not being able to stop the suicide. The fact that life is not one's own means that everything influences each other," says Uno.

The question also arises as to whether the will at the time of deciding to euthanize and the will at the moment of death are truly unified. Human will is not that certain.

Buddhism, which holds life in the utmost respect, considers natural death to be the ultimate goal. In that sense, he also takes a keen eye toward advances in science and technology that make excessive life extension possible.

"When it becomes possible to extend life indefinitely, the concept of natural death becomes blurred, and a logic arises that says there must be an end to it at some point. From that perspective, life extension seems like an act of manipulating life. No one has the right to manipulate life that belongs to no one. Is this science truly bringing benefits to people, or is it becoming a science that causes suffering to people? We must assess these points and then sound the alarm," says Furuyama.

The average life expectancy of Japanese people is currently 87 years for women and 81

years for men. By the way, in 1966 the average age for women was 73 and for men 68. In a 1966 interview related to his book "Introduction to Hagakure," Yukio Mishima said the following: "(During the war) when I believed that death would come someday, and that it would come in the not-too-distant future, I was in a happier psychological state than I am now. It is truly strange, but not only does it appear beautiful in my memory, but humans also feel strangely happy at such times." He also said: "Because humans are always thinking about ideals or what they are living for, they quickly tire of living only for themselves."

Back then, we were in the "era of a 70-year lifespan." Incidentally, when I was old enough to understand things, it was said that we were in the "era of an 80-year lifespan." And now we are in the "era of a 100-year lifespan." We are entering a society of ultra-longevity, but no one knows how this reality will affect humans.

However, many modern people who have experienced a time when life expectancies were 70 or 80 years old have a vague idea of what the 100-year lifespan will be like. It's certainly not a rosy world. A long-lived society is supported by advances in medical technology, but more specifically, it's supported by life-extension technologies. These technologies keep our declining minds and bodies on their final legs. "Advances in medical technology have made it possible for a 100-year-old to maintain the mental and physical strength of a 20-year-old." If such a world were to become a reality, there would be widespread cheers of joy, but the reality is different.

Mishima also left us with these words: "The happiness we seek today is the happiness of living, and living means family happiness, leisure happiness, and enjoyment."

In short, modern people are simply living for enjoyment rather than for ideals or something else. To put it more bluntly, they aspire to live solely for themselves. Conversely, it's only natural that modern people, with no ideals or anything, would tire of life. Incidentally, Mishima stated that the continued peace and prosperity of postwar society was ultimately the result of industrialization, and that there was nothing worthy of spiritual and intellectual reconstruction. Given this historical and social context, living out a 100-year lifespan will be no easy task. For those without a specific ideal and unable to live solely for pleasure, the 100-year lifespan would be nothing less than "penance" and "living hell." The fact that dignified death and euthanasia are being highlighted as options is, in a sense, self-evident, and, if we go further, could even be the beginning of Mishima's spiritual and intellectual reconstruction. Whether dignified death or euthanasia, being aware of death means realizing that life is limited. This realization will lead people to cherish every moment more than ever before, and the accumulation of this can lead to spiritual and intellectual reconstruction. In reality,

institutionalizing dignified death and euthanasia in Japan is a high hurdle and would require considerable time and effort. However, there is certainly a certain demand, and it is easy to predict that this demand will continue to grow in the future.

Japan's Children

According to the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, the number of child abuse consultations in fiscal year 2023 reached a record high of 225,509, an increase of more than 10,000 from fiscal year 2022. Why is the number of child abuse cases increasing despite the declining birthrate and the rapidly declining child population? The term "child poverty" has become a common refrain in recent years. About 40 years ago, when I was in elementary school, my drunk father boasted to my family at dinner, "Japan is the richest country in the world! So study hard!" As a child, I had doubts about whether Japan was truly wealthy, but my parents, teachers, and other adults around me generally believed it was, and this belief spread to their children. It's said that "children are the treasure of the nation." The healthy development of children who will lead the next generation leads to the healthy development of society. However, judging by the number of abuse cases, Japan today seems to be moving in the opposite direction. A healthy society cannot exist if we continue to treat the already declining child population with such skepticism. What is happening to children today? What has changed since I was a child?

To find out, I visited children's cafeterias and spoke with school teachers, local volunteers, and local government anti-abuse officials. Listening to their stories gave me a vague idea of the circumstances surrounding children, but I just couldn't get to the heart of the matter. After all, you can't grasp the true essence of the problem unless you listen to the stories of the parents who are actually abusing their children and the children who are being abused. However, this is an almost impossible task. Finding abusive parents is a considerable effort, and even if you did manage to find them, there's no way they'd readily agree to an interview with someone like me who has no authority. They stubbornly refuse, and eventually the police end up involved. Abusive parents know they're doing something wrong. They know it, but they can't stop. That's why they try so hard to hide it. Listening to children who are being abused is also extremely difficult. It's difficult to find such children, and even if they do, they never admit to being abused. They know that if their parents find out, the abuse will only intensify, so they stubbornly keep quiet. Abuse unfolds behind closed doors and is difficult for those around them to detect. This makes early detection and prevention challenging. However, we cannot ignore it. Unless we somehow implement effective solutions in society, Japan's future is

in peril.

When I think about issues surrounding children, there is one book that never leaves my mind. It is the educational book "Emile," published in 1712 by philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. At the time, abandoned children were rampant in Europe, and the book emphasizes the importance of orphanages where society as a whole raises children. Perhaps these same discussions are needed in Japan today. However, after the publication of "Emile," Rousseau himself was caught in a major scandal when he abandoned five of his own children and placed them in orphanages, forcing him into exile...

"Local people sometimes complain, saying there's no way there are poor people around here," "There's no children dying of hunger, so what's the point of running a children's cafeteria? We're sometimes told it's not poverty, but simply a family problem. We get particularly noticeable complaints from older people," and "Perhaps the people of Tokyo have a high sense of pride, but no matter how many examples we give, they don't want to acknowledge poverty in their area. We're sometimes confronted, asking what we're doing when there are no starving children anywhere." I continued interviewing NPOs that run children's cafeterias in Tokyo, Osaka, and other places. Children's cafeterias are becoming more well-known and support is expanding, but there are still many cases where they are looked down upon. "However," they all assert in unison, "there are children in every area who don't have access to proper food. That's the reality." "When I'm fundraising, I think most people have a negative view, saying that there is no poverty in big cities. But that's a big mistake. There are starving children out there, we just can't see them. Those who understand will understand right away, but those who don't will never understand and don't even try," one of the people involved said, shrugging.

Some children haven't eaten anything in three days. Some survive on potato chips from morning until night. Some children have school lunches as their only meal. What's more, it's said that the number of such children has increased relatively since the COVID-19 pandemic. As the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a mood of self-restraint, criticism of children's cafeterias has also intensified. The NPOs that run children's cafeterias were caught in a dilemma. Children's cafeterias cannot be run remotely. However, if they were to carelessly open a children's cafeteria and cause an infection outbreak, it would be a major problem. Even so, they couldn't just leave starving children alone. "I wonder what they're doing? Are they okay?" one of the people involved muttered, looking up into the sky.

Most children's cafeterias are open once a week or twice a month, but no one involved believes that's enough. That said, there's also the issue of budget. NPOs with ample budgets are rare, and in many cases, the ingredients for the meals provided to children are donated by organizations like the Japan Agricultural Cooperative Association (JA). While holding a cafeteria every day would be ideal, various constraints make it difficult.

Today's children's cafeterias have become more of an event-like experience. The image is of children gathering after school to play and then eating dinner on the way. This is because, in the past, children's cafeterias were labeled as "poverty," and there were many cases of children being bullied at school for visiting them. Local schools sometimes expressed reluctance to hold the cafeterias. As a result, they began to open their doors as a place where anyone can drop in casually. Nowadays, most children come to the cafeteria to play with their friends, not for dinner. It's just a facade of eating while they're there. However, a small percentage of these children don't usually eat properly.

"From my experience, roughly one in six children doesn't eat properly," a source revealed. Another source explained:

"If you just look at their clothes, none of them look like starving children. Their hair is neat. They have parents and they earn money. But starving children eat differently. They have no manners and eat voraciously." "You can also tell a child from poverty by the crook of their teeth." "Child abuse and child poverty generally overlap."

I spoke to a woman who used to work with children in Osaka. She was a pastor, and at the time she set up container houses on her church grounds and offered them free of charge as a place for children fleeing abuse or starving children to stay. "Many children were fleeing violent parents. We couldn't help but help them, so we provided a place for them, but it was always difficult," she recalled. By difficult, she meant not only the difficulties of hiding and protecting the children, but also the difficulty of dealing with the retaliation from abusive parents. Because the church was frequented by many children who had fled abuse, it was seen as "children who went to church being abused." Perhaps fearing that their abuse would be exposed, parents were aggressive toward the church. These parents would make baseless accusations such as "our children are being brainwashed by the church" or "our children have been abducted." As a result, churches have sometimes been subject to administrative sanctions.

"The children were simply coming to the church because they wanted to escape abuse and eat, but the parents had a problem with Christianity as a religion and tried to take their children back. It wasn't because they loved their children, it was simply a way to hide the abuse. So after a while, the children would run back to the church. It was a cycle

that repeated itself," she said with a shrug.

An official from another NPO added:

"At our children's cafeteria, either the father or the mother comes to pick up their children after dinner. However, some parents don't come at all. This is what is known as neglect, and they don't pay any attention to their children at all. When we call these parents to ask them to pick up their children, they find out they're at the pachinko parlor or having an affair."

Neglect is also a form of abuse, but neglect is more prevalent in single-parent households.

"What do children do when their parents don't come to pick them up? Do they go home alone, or stay overnight?" I asked, and the person involved began to share an anecdote.

The child in question (Mr. A) always came to the cafeteria with his elementary school principal and left with him. One day, the principal was unable to attend due to personal commitments, and Mr. A came to the cafeteria alone. As a result, the cafeteria staff contacted Mr. A's mother in advance and repeatedly urged her to come and pick him up that day. After dinner, the children were free to play, but one by one, their parents' children began to leave the order in which they had come to pick them up. Then, A-kun tried to blend in with the other children and go home. Even when they tried to stop him by saying, "A-kun, it's not time yet," he would wait for an opportunity to leave. They tried to calm him down by saying, "Your mother is coming," but he wouldn't listen. After that, A-kun continued to want to go home, telling obvious lies like, "I have to go shopping" or "I have an appointment with a friend." The staff member tried to calm him down each time, but his mother still hadn't shown up, even after 9pm. Growing worried, they called her, but there was no sign of her answering. In the end, the staff member decided to drive A-kun home. When they drove him to his house, it was pitch black inside, and it was clear at a glance that no one was there. A-kun must have known all along that his mother wouldn't be coming to pick him up. That's probably why he wanted to go home so badly. Children who grow up without a place to belong hunger for a place to belong. As such children grow up, they will do anything, good or bad, to find a place to belong. "Many of the children I looked after ended up in and out of prison," the pastor said in a low voice. Children who grew up abused end up abusing their own children when they grow up and become parents. There's a vicious cycle that follows. This is a point that's often heard. From an outsider's perspective, it seems logical and persuasive, and it's easy to accept it at face value, but is that really the case? From what I've heard, it's not wrong, but it's also quite off the mark. Many people who are concerned about child abuse and poverty and work hard to support children, such as running children's cafeterias, have been abused in the past.

One person involved said, "My parents' abuse was so severe that I was almost killed in junior high. I was repeatedly hit with a bat while I was sleeping, and at one point I was forced to use a wheelchair for about six months." Another person involved recalled, "My father was also abusive. He was an alcoholic, and he often beat my mother. But that was the way things were in the Showa era."

I also heard stories like this.

"When I was in my 20s and working as an office lady, my father would beat me up and I would go to work with bruises on my face. One day, I was taking a bath at home and my father came in with a knife in hand. I turned pale and ran outside naked, but he still chased after me with the knife in his hand. It was a scene from hell."

Hearing this, I asked him again.

"Did your father have a job? Was he a yakuza?"

"No, he was a civil servant. He worked for the government."

"A civil servant... He did an honest job at the government, didn't he?"

"Yes, he did. So he might have been stressed out."

No matter how stressed a man is, chasing a naked daughter with a knife in his hand seems a bit wrong...but in any case, it seems that parents exploding with anger and abusing their children is just as common today as it was in the past. In fact, there are countless such cases. In some cases, those involved may even brag about their misfortune. "Back then, it was common for fathers to burn down houses or throw televisions at their children. If you think about it, maybe things are better now," one person involved said with a smirk.

While many adults are critical of children's cafeterias and child support programs, perhaps they also believe that "things are better now than they were back then." Abuse and poverty have always existed to some degree and will likely never disappear. They could also be considered an underlying social problem. Putting that aside, many involved parties have experienced abuse in the past, but they have not abused their own children. Rather, they do not want others to experience what they experienced. If this is the case, then the view that abuse is a cycle is incorrect. Conversely, there are parents who abuse their own children despite being in an abusive environment as children. In short, the backgrounds of abuse and poverty are full of exceptions. This makes it difficult to find a uniform solution.

Child suicides are also on the rise. According to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 527 elementary, junior high and high school students

committed suicide in 2024, the highest number since statistics began in 1980. The top causes and motives were poor academic performance and worries about career paths, not significantly different from previous years. While the public is eagerly calling for urgent action to combat the declining birthrate, another important measure is to ensure that the lives we have been given are raised healthily. Some say that poverty is the problem. While there is certainly some truth to that, from my interviews, there are also children who are living healthy and happy lives despite being poor. Even in financially difficult families, there are plenty of families where parents dote on and take good care of their children. Children whose only decent meals come from children's cafeterias are not necessarily poor. Rather, they come from fairly affluent families and are well-dressed. However, they lack a strong bond with their parents. In short, their parents simply don't pay them any attention. "It's not that they don't have the money. They only spend it on themselves and never on their children. It's a bit much to give a child a 500 yen coin and expect them to get through the day," said a person involved with a children's cafeteria, raising their voice.

In short, the environments surrounding children are infinitely different, and, to put it bluntly, luck and fate are key. This isn't limited to children; the environments of people living in this country today are almost entirely exceptions. Everyone works differently, uses their time differently, and has different lifestyles, hobbies, and preferences. As diversity increases, the concept of "normal" is dissolving and becoming blurred.

Tragedies like abuse and suicide arise from a small, cruel exception. In that sense, the criticism that "it's not poverty, it's simply a family problem" is not necessarily wrong. I also believe that it is primarily a family problem, and that it is inappropriate to suddenly treat it as a societal problem. Even so, tragedies are still being repeated. Their numbers are increasing year by year, and they can no longer be dismissed as exceptions. Even if something is a family problem, if its number increases, it becomes a societal problem. Furthermore, it is impossible to solve child abuse caused by complete neglect and child abuse caused by excessive attention with the same approach. Abuse can be broadly divided into many different types—parents who refuse to feed their children, parents who are violent, parents who sexually abuse, and parents who are overly strict—and addressing each of them requires countless solutions. From this perspective, it's a problem beyond the capabilities of governments and local governments, which can only implement uniform policies aimed at the largest number of people. Meanwhile, NPOs, with limited resources, cannot address all issues. For business-based companies, it's an area that's difficult to profit from and difficult to get involved in. However, if anti-abuse solutions could be packaged and deployed, it could potentially become a viable business

for governments, local governments, and local NPOs.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the philosopher famous for his "The Social Contract," explored his educational theory in "Emile." In it, he argued that the foundation of education is to promote free and natural growth. He argued that children are innocent and vulnerable, but that they can flourish if adults provide them with the appropriate opportunities and educational spaces. In fact, school field trips, mountain climbing, and picnics were popularized by Rousseau. Rousseau lived in 18th-century Europe, a time of the Industrial Revolution and the rise of capitalism, when harsh child labor and abuse of parental rights were rampant. Many children were abandoned, and there were calls for child rescue.

What I like most is the passage about children being able to thrive if they are provided with the right opportunities and educational facilities. In other words, parents don't have to raise their children themselves; children can thrive if the right adults, communities, or society provide them with the right opportunities and educational facilities. Some children endure brutal hardships or even risk their lives to stay with their parents at a time when they should be receiving as much love and having fun. If this is the case, shouldn't the government and society take the lead in providing the right opportunities and educational facilities? Essentially, they could build fully-fledged dormitories where children could live and receive the right opportunities and education. While this is easier said than done, as it would cost money and ultimately result in the use of public authority to separate parents and children, I believe it's a worthwhile idea to consider as a way to rescue children who deserve it.

As an aside, we'll likely see increased use of AI and other digital technologies in child support settings. However, the extent to which these technologies can reduce serious cases of abuse and hunger remains unclear. By their very nature, addressing abuse and hunger cannot be based solely on efficiency. AI and other digital technologies are powerful tools for streamlining and reducing labor. Conversely, their strengths are difficult to exploit in areas where they are unsuitable. While some of Japan's social challenges can be resolved through efficiency, labor-saving, and automation, others cannot. Abuse and hunger are closer to the latter.

Traditional Support Systems Are Reaching Their Limits

Resco, a Hiroshima-based provider of electronic medical records for psychiatry, is developing "Waroku Public Health," a system to support hikikomori support organizations (such as local governments and NPOs) and medical institutions. The

system enables the sharing of consultation records and upbringing environment information created and maintained by each support organization. This will enable each consultation center to provide individually optimized support. While hikikomori is both an old and new issue, an OECD survey found that over 15% of Japanese people have little interaction with their local community and are socially isolated, the highest among OECD member states. The percentage of children feeling particularly lonely is particularly high, and the suicide rate among young people is among the highest. Regarding this situation, Hitoshi Taniguchi, representative director of the NPO Student Support Faith, acknowledges that "traditional support systems have their limits." Based in Saga Prefecture, the organization promotes the independence of children and young people. It has achieved results based on outreach (visiting support) and a multi-layered support network. With the number of unemployed young people remaining high nationwide, the organization's efforts, known as the "Saga Model," have attracted national attention.

More than 80% of hikikomori suffer from interpersonal difficulties, approximately 30% suffer from addictions such as gaming, and over 60% face challenges in their home environment. A man in his 30s who had been a hikikomori for eight years had been involved with numerous support groups, but his condition showed no signs of improvement. According to Taniguchi, "More than 60% of young hikikomori have used multiple forms of public assistance in the past. Even these efforts failed to improve their condition, leading to a strong sense of distrust and rejection toward consultation and support." Hikikomori individuals have a very weak ability to connect with others. Therefore, working closely with them to improve their condition is key. In the case of a 17-year-old boy who had withdrawn into his room, his school pointed out that he had academic problems, but it was later discovered that he actually had various issues, including mental illness and abuse in his parents' homes. Encouraging these young people to continue their education and lead stable lives requires the involvement of many stakeholders, including schools, doctors, government officials, and NPOs.

"In this age of intense criticism, we need to create an environment where families who previously were unable to sound the SOS can do so, while strictly maintaining confidentiality of sensitive information," Taniguchi said.

As part of this effort, the organization is working to establish a one-stop consultation and support system. It is said that support can be strengthened by having hikikomori community support centers, local youth support stations, self-reliance support for the impoverished, and nonprofit organizations function as platforms. Supporting isolated

young people facing multiple challenges requires a system that enables a multifaceted approach. Looking at it from the other side, if such a system is established, young people will become independent, as the Saga model has proven. When support organizations collaborate to provide multifaceted support, indirect work is particularly troublesome. Multiple forms must be created to carry out a single support project. Moreover, the forms are different for each support project and are not compatible. Filling out these forms poses a considerable burden on the field. From this perspective, Waroku Public Health is highly regarded as useful, as it centralizes various information and allows it to be safely shared among all relevant organizations.

A Life-Changing Encounter

"I want to reduce the number of children who experience the same things I did. That's what made me want to become a teacher."

Narumi Ishizaki was in her second year as an elementary school teacher (as of 2022). She began teaching at an elementary school in Takatsuki City in April 2021 and is currently the homeroom teacher for fourth graders.

"I just can't help but love the children," she says with a cheerful smile. Despite this, her childhood was turbulent. Ever since she was a child, she had trouble fitting in with others and often missed school, even in elementary school. By sixth grade, she missed even more, and even skipped the junior high school entrance ceremony. Still, she attended school four days a week at first.

"But gradually, the kids around me started to look at me with a strange look, and there was even bullying. After that, I stopped going to school altogether and became a recluse at home," she recalls. After graduating from junior high school, she didn't attend high school and remained a recluse for two years. She also had numerous conflicts with her family.

A turning point came at the age of 17, when Ishizaki enrolled in Aioi Gakuin High School, a correspondence school in Aioi City, Hyogo Prefecture. The school offers full-time, part-time, and correspondence courses, and Ishizaki attended several times a week.

"There I met a wonderful teacher, Mr. Oike Ryoichi, who gave me confidence in life. Meeting Mr. Oike changed my life," Ishizaki says.

Through her interactions with Mr. Oike, Ishizaki decided she wanted to work with children, or to work in a field that would eliminate bullying and abuse, and she began to consider going to university. One episode from around that time is when she published a picture book called "What's Wrong with Bench-kun?"

"Mr. Oike asked me if I'd like to try making a picture book. He came up with both the

text and the illustrations for the book, but the pictures weren't cute, so I rewrote them. Since I had put so much effort into making it, I wanted to have it bound and have lots of children read it," Ishizaki says.

However, binding and publishing costs money. So he decided to enter the "Dream Speech Contest" sponsored by the Youth Dream Support Foundation (represented by Suncrest President Minoru Ueda). This contest allows young people who have dreams and goals for the future but need financial support to give speeches on the theme of their dreams, and winners are awarded financial support. With a 10-minute speech, Ishizaki successfully secured 500,000 yen in support, which he used to bind his picture book.

"This experience also gave me confidence in life," he says.

He enrolled in the Faculty of Education at university at the age of 20. Building on his internship experience, he decided to become an elementary school teacher. His first year as a teacher began during the COVID-19 pandemic and was fraught with a series of unforeseen circumstances.

"Among the children I worked with, there were some who had issues. At first, some would walk or yell during class, and some would even disappear. But I faced them properly each time and gave them guidance, and after about three months, they calmed down. What I've learned as a teacher is that building a relationship of trust with children is everything. Even if you scold a child, if there is a relationship of trust, it is guidance, but if there is not, it becomes corporal punishment," says Ishizaki.

I spoke to Ishizaki about my research on children's cafeterias and child abuse.

Ishizaki said, "There are actually children for whom children's cafeterias are their lifeline, so caring for children is important, but I think caring for parents is just as important. Many parents are struggling to make ends meet due to unemployment or pay cuts, and their children disobey instructions, leaving them emotionally unstable. I think how we care for such parents is also an issue."

It seems that what children want most is the reassurance that comes from knowing that there are adults who will not leave them alone. When children walk away, shout, or disappear during class, it's a sign of their desire for attention, and this behavior is apparently more common among children from dual-income families. If that's the case, wouldn't it be better to create a proper children's institution where children can live there and receive appropriate developmental opportunities and education from the right adults? However, Ishizaki balked at my suggestion.

"Institutional environments bring together children who, whatever their circumstances, live away from their parents and other adults. Some children express their emotions through verbal abuse and violence out of loneliness. Rather than gathering such children

in one place, I think it would be better to utilize the foster care system so that they can live safely at home."

Ishizaki reiterated.

"Meeting a truly trustworthy adult like Dr. Oike meant everything to me."

A sense of parenting lost

"Perhaps due to the changing times, the sense of parenting that has been passed down from generation to generation has been lost. There are mothers whose first baby they ever touched was their own. So they don't know how to hold a baby or change a diaper." These are the words of Emiko Kobayashi, representative of the nonprofit organization Otete no Kai. Kobayashi has been traveling around the country as a baby massage instructor for over 20 years.

"Twenty years ago, things were better. I never imagined it would get this bad," says Kobayashi. Babies these days have stiff backs and shoulders, and are constantly tense. This stiffness and tension is apparently transmitted from their mothers. Nowadays, dual-income households are the norm, and an increasing number of women are forced to continue working even while pregnant. This can be quite stressful and straining. The stress and tension a mother experiences is directly transmitted to her baby. Massaging such babies loosens their bodies, making them easier to hold.

"If a baby's body is stiff, they arch their back, making it difficult to hold and tiring for the mother. But if their body is flexible, it's easier to hold them, they fall asleep more easily, and parenting becomes easier," Kobayashi says.

I spoke to Kobayashi, who has seen many parents and children over the years. Why does child abuse occur, and can it be eliminated? Kobayashi then shared this story.

"Once, when I visited a home to give a massage, the mother told me, 'I had a dream I was drinking my baby's blood through a straw.' I was shocked, but I realized that there are many mothers like me."

The baby was one year old at the time, and constantly clung to its mother. If the mother left her side even for a moment, the baby would cry. As a result, the mother was forced to be one with her baby all day, unable to clean the room or prepare meals. This also led to a deterioration in her relationship with her husband. The mother felt increasingly pressured, and suffered alone.

"In fact, babies understand when their mothers are distressed. That's why they cry when you leave them out of worry. The mother was unaware of this," says Kobayashi.

At the time, Kobayashi advised the mother, "Even if it's just a few minutes a day, please make time to enjoy yourself with your child." A while later, the mother contacted her,

saying, "I've finally been able to spend some quality time with my baby," and it seemed her relationship with her child had settled down. It seems that the baby also feels more at ease once he's able to have some fun time, and he stops crying when he's just a little distance away. The mother, in turn, is able to devote more time to cleaning and meals.

Many mothers struggle alone, not knowing how to interact with their children. Despite their best efforts to raise their children, some mothers find themselves feeling increasingly pressured, becoming frustrated and harsh, which can lead to chronic abuse. "But by massaging babies and spending even a little fun time together, babies feel more at ease, stop crying, and sleep better. It also makes the mother feel more at ease. In such an environment, abuse should be impossible. I believe it can be eliminated," says Kobayashi.

While I was interviewing them, a parent and child came to Kobayashi for a baby massage. "My baby won't crawl or tummy-dive, but instead crawls on his back. I'm worried about him, so I'm asking for baby massage," the mother explained.

After the massage, the baby slept soundly, seemingly unbothered by our conversations. "Some babies cry every hour at night, but massaging them helps them sleep soundly. If the baby sleeps soundly, the mother can sleep well too, and she won't get frustrated," says Kobayashi.

By the way, it's also good for fathers to massage their babies.

Kobayashi says, "Many fathers don't know how to interact with their children, so it's a good idea to connect with them through massage. Babies actually love massages from their fathers, who have big hands. If you interact with them from an early age, they will become attached to their father and won't dislike him even when they grow up."

Contradictory Views on Family

According to French demographer and family anthropologist Emmanuel Todd, a country's future can be predicted by examining its demographic statistics. Todd cites "population decline" and "low birthrate" as issues that threaten Japan's survival. In his book "Japan's Crisis: A Nation Dominated by the Elderly" (Bunshun Shinsho), he attributes these declines to the "diseases of the lineal family." Family types vary from country to country, reflecting each country's origins. While the United Kingdom and the United States define the "absolute nuclear family (parents nominate heirs in their wills)" and France defines the "egalitarian nuclear family (equally divided inheritance)," Japan and Germany define the "lineal family (primogeniture)." While it may seem odd to consider the Japanese family type, which is increasingly becoming nuclear or non-family,

as a lineal family, Todd believes that lineal family values are still maintained and even stronger in Japan.

Characteristics of lineal families include "intergenerational inheritance," "accumulation of technology and capital," "high educational standards," "diligence," and "social discipline." This is an ideal characteristic for the development of agricultural and industrial societies, but once established, organizations prioritize maintaining their structure, and are reluctant to change even when they no longer fit the times, resulting in a tendency to become fossilized. Furthermore, when the value of the direct lineage, which emphasizes order, is reinforced, sexual promiscuity is also suppressed. Looking at it this way, it seems that the current family type in Japan is the nuclear family, with its strong value of the direct lineage. Incidentally, in the original nuclear family, children leave their parents' home early and establish independent households. Parent-child relationships are free, and there is little sense of children supporting their parents.

The modern Japanese family type seems to forcibly combine two completely different views of family. In other words, it mixes the nuclear family, which values self-care, with the direct lineage family, which values the care of kin until the end as a form of intergenerational inheritance. As a result, the family structure is unstable and has become a troublesome organization. The increasing defamilialization may be due to many Japanese people's aversion to belonging to such troublesome organizations. In agricultural and industrial societies, economic growth accompanied the rise of the nuclear family, which likely managed to survive despite its strong emphasis on direct lineage. However, in today's information society, where Japan's economic growth has stalled, the value of direct lineage appears to be making it difficult to maintain the nuclear family.

The book includes a dialogue between Todd and Kazuto Hongo (Professor at the Historiographical Institute of the University of Tokyo). In it, Hongo notes that while historical documents on the family structures of aristocrats and samurai remain, little is known about the family structures of the majority of peasants. Meanwhile, independent ethnologist Keisuke Akamatsu argues that rural areas were village communities, with the village representing a single family. Akamatsu is the author of works such as "The Ethnic Culture of the Extraordinary People" and "The Folklore of Night Visits," and is known for his intensive fieldwork investigating rural sexual customs.

Until the 1960s, ancient customs remained in Japanese rural areas, and a sexual logic

that defies current common sense existed. For example, a man named A and a woman named B get married and have a child. No matter how you look at it, the child looks exactly like a man named C who lives next door. For some reason, C's child looks exactly like a man named D who lives across the street. Even so, A, B, C, and D all dote on their child. That's because he's a village child. No matter who the parents are, as long as the child is born in the village, it will be raised in the village. Sex in village society was that liberal and open. You could say that sex was used as a way for villagers to communicate with each other, but from a modern perspective, it's a typical orgy. However, if an outsider with no ties to the village sneaked in and tried to have a relationship with a village woman, all the men in the village would beat him up, so there seems to have been a clear line between inside and outside the village.

Yoyogi: Was it after the Meiji period, when Christianity and Western ideas were introduced?

Akamatsu: The worst thing is the Imperial Rescript on Education. I attack it all the time.

Yoyogi: So they're still alive?

Akamatsu: The people at the head of education administration haven't changed much. It's like a prison constitution. As long as the Imperial Rescript on Education remains, there will be no true freedom.

The above is an excerpt from a conversation between adult video director Yoyogi Tadashi and Akamatsu, included in "School of Love: The World of Yoyogi Tadashi" (edited by Yamada Yoichi, Natsume Shobo). In the conversation, Akamatsu, in his crisp Kansai dialect, denounces how power has controlled and distorted the sexuality of ordinary people. To summarize Akamatsu's argument briefly, relationships between men and women in Japanese villages in the past were extremely tolerant. Since children were raised in the village, it wasn't a major issue. Meanwhile, after opening up to the world with the Meiji Restoration, Japan promoted modernization under the slogan "Datsu-A, Nikkei." Many Westerners came to Japan after the country opened its doors to the world. Some perceived Japanese villages as promiscuous and viewed Japan as a barbaric nation. Fearing that the West would see Japan as an inferior nation, the Japanese government resorted to a desperate measure: forcing bushido on villagers. Samurai were typically lineal families, and monogamy was the norm. The government placed emphasis on this principle and instilled bushido in villages. This led to the Imperial Rescript on Education and moral education. As a result, the once-extravagant village life was suppressed, and at least the appearance of a modern nation was restored. This trend led to the nuclear

family, which, through postwar reforms by SCAP, has continued to the present day.

Looking at it this way, we are forced to reconsider what the nuclear family means to the Japanese. We believe that the nuclear family evolved naturally and proactively as the times changed, but perhaps we were simply being manipulated to suit the powers of the time. The nuclear family is a family structure that was naturally and actively formed by people in the UK and the US, and is a family structure that is inherently unrelated to Japanese people. Looking at it from another perspective, it is an unnatural and passive family structure.

This applies to all human activities, but unnatural things cannot last. They inevitably fail at some point. While it would be premature to dismiss the current trend of non-marriage and declining birth rates as a failure of family structure, we should be aware that the nuclear family is a family structure that is not inherently part of Japanese DNA. As an aside, I once read Akamatsu's book and slapped my knee in agreement. When I was a student in the 1990s, there was a group of high school girls known as "kogals," and their earning pocket money through "compensated dating" became a kind of social problem. At the time, Japan was one of the world's leading wealthy nations, at the forefront of economics. If women worked normally, they should have had no financial problems, so why young women living in such a country would choose to engage in prostitution was sometimes covered in international media as a Japanese mystery. When I read newspaper and magazine articles investigating the realities of kogals, "money" and "communication" always ranked highly as reasons for engaging in compensated dating. I understood the money aspect, but I didn't really understand the meaning of communication. Later, after reading Akamatsu's writings, I began to speculate that the village community DNA flowing through these girls might be causing them to use sex as a form of communication.

Nuclear family, lineal family, and village community. Family structures that appear to be nuclear families but actually embrace the values of lineal families, and in some cases, the values of village communities, are unnatural. The more we try to maintain these unnatural and complex structures, the more restrictions and oppression we face. This unnaturalness, complexity, and the accompanying restrictions and oppression are now causing various problems. Take young carers, for example. Children under the age of 18 caring for and being cared for by family members has become a major social issue, and it appears as though the values of lineal families or village communities are being implemented within the nuclear family. Mutual aid, which should ideally take place in large families with many relatives and in communities with a shared destiny, is immeasurable when it

is carried out in nuclear families or tiny families with a single parent and one child.

This family structure is a haphazard mix of the values of the nuclear family, the lineal family, and the village community. I believe this is the modern Japanese family structure. Especially after the war, when the government spearheaded a "family modernization" initiative, the value of the nuclear family was forcefully injected into society. A family structure that mixes multiple values is prone to discord and should not last long, but the robust economic growth of the modern era has covered these discords. However, we are now a mature society, and significant economic growth is no longer expected. The so-called "lost 30 years" were perhaps the result of the economy no longer being able to fully cover these discords, resulting in family problems and other interpersonal friction.

There are only three ways to change this situation. One is to return to the way things were before—that is, to a return to the lineal family in its essential sense. In reality, however, this would be extremely difficult. In a society where economics have become so individualized and values have become so diverse, a family structure that severely restricts individual freedom is incompatible. This leaves two options open. One is to destroy the concept of family. Paradoxically, destroying traditional concepts of family would make it easier for individuals to develop their own honest views of family. Individuals should be free to pursue their ideals and take responsibility for family activities. For example, shouldn't we be more accepting of children born out of wedlock and illegitimate children? From the perspective of village community values, children born in the village should be raised in the village as "village children." If the idea that children born in Japan should be raised by society as "Japanese children" became more widespread, the number of children might increase. However, in today's Japan, where village-like communities have collapsed, casually pushing village community values would lead to social unrest. More importantly, if individuals were to simply practice their own individual views of family in today's society, a huge variety of family structures would emerge, leading to a proliferation of values. An ideological foundation that embraces diverse views on family is essential, and we must first create such an ideological foundation. But who can create such a foundation?

The final step is to thoroughly embrace the true essence of the nuclear family. Personally, I believe this is the most appropriate. A nuclear family is complete once people get married, have children, and the children leave home. Parents and children are equals, and their relationship is like that of close friends. If they are not close, they may never hear from each other again. Children do not take care of their parents. When children become independent from their parents, parents also become independent from their children. There is no such idea as giving birth to children so that they will be taken care

of, or that since you raised them, they should take care of you in your old age. If these values are understood and each person plays their own role, family structures will be much more open. Issues such as young carers and bitter family disputes over inheritances will also decrease. I don't know if this will immediately curb the declining birthrate, but in the long run, I believe it will lay the foundation for a sustainable society.

Chapter 3: A Cross-Section of a Divergent Society

"Even when we talk about good people and bad people, it's not clear what is good and what is evil. Common sense tells us what is good and what is evil, and we often judge what is good and what is evil based solely on the conventional wisdom of the time. However, this is nothing more than conventional wisdom (or expediency), and when the time comes, it becomes all too common to be unable to distinguish between good and evil. Capitalists consider exploitation good, and workers consider exploitation bad. Furthermore, value standards constantly fluctuate with social change. If we recognize this, then the question of value and value standards necessitates new logic and new ways of thinking."

The above is an excerpt from Yamagishi Gaishi's *The Human Dazai* Osamu (Chikuma Bunko). I purposely quote it because what I'm about to say might be a little awkward if you read it from a conventional perspective. I urge you to read this article with the current context, where values are changing. Otherwise, my point—to clearly illustrate the difference between people who live in a society that develops by flexibly weathering rapidly changing trends and people who turn their backs on trends and cling to traditional ways—will not be conveyed.

For a while, I worked with around 10 hostesses. The reason the declining birthrate problem has not been resolved is because the approach to the issue is misaligned. The reason for this misalignment is that the declining birthrate is not the kind of issue that can be solved through policy or other means. There is no other topic that allows for as much rambling as the declining birthrate. When I discuss this with fellow journalists, we usually come to the same conclusion: "In other words, people are not having children because they have no expectations of society today. They are implicitly protesting that it is not a place worth living in." If this is the case, then the only thing we can do is create a new society worth living in.

By chance, I interviewed hostesses working in the nightlife district, and learned that they were the targets of "unconscious discrimination" (microaggressions) and suffered. I learned that their extraordinary desire to conceal their personal information and privacy, and their fixation on lies and pretensions, are ultimately just a way to escape unconscious social discrimination. While I interacted with these women, I also actively interacted with women unrelated to the nightlife industry and discussed the industry with them. Women unrelated to the industry ruthlessly dislike women who do. Perhaps it's a physiological aversion, but I heard some pretty intense opinions. When I stated that the situation hostesses find themselves in poses a humanitarian issue and that support is warranted, some women confronted me with a sharp look, saying, "Why should we support these women? Aren't the people who really need support the non-regular employees and those who work hard but aren't rewarded for it?" Another woman insulted me, saying, "You're absolutely wrong. You're still wandering around at your age, and that's why you're drawn to flashy women." "In reality, it's not that flashy. She says she just wants a stable life, even if it's just a little bit," I gently countered, to which she replied, "Why are men so stupid? To fall for such obvious lies. If she wanted to live a simple life, she would have done so a long time ago."

"Some girls end up committing suicide after being threatened by bad men and having their money stolen," I said. "Why don't you just call the police? They'd arrest those kinds of men right away," she replied. "No, they don't want to reveal their identities to anyone, so they can't consult the police or a lawyer," I told her. She widened her eyes and said, "It's not their fault for working in a job that doesn't allow them to reveal their identities. They deserve it. If I were them, I would call the police right away," she said, becoming even more forceful.

"That's true, but... but I can't just stand by and watch when they're driven to suicide." I looked up into the air. The woman was silent for a while, then said in a firm tone, "I feel sorry for them, but I would never get involved with a woman like that." Some women scoffed, saying, "No one will thank you for going out of your way for a woman like that. You're just a clown." And they were right. After that, I lost all contact with women who worked in the night industry, and we lost all contact. One thing I learned, though, is that unconscious discrimination is rampant in Japan. If we could reduce this unconscious discrimination, Japanese people wouldn't be any smaller than necessary and would be able to live more authentically and generously. Perhaps some of the phenomena currently considered social issues could be tolerated as diversity and inclusion rather than as social issues.

From 2018 to 2019, I interacted with around 10 women. "No love affairs," "No borrowing or lending money," and "No pursuing too deeply" were the golden rules I set for myself when interacting with them. Women working in the night industry come from a wide variety of backgrounds. Some were in their 20s and some in their 40s. Their hometowns were diverse, ranging from Hokkaido in the north to Kyushu in the south. If there was one thing they had in common, it was that they lived in isolation and discord. It was like they were standing barefoot on the edge of a cliff in a howling cold wind. Of course, these women did not choose isolation and discord willingly.

Interviewing hostesses was not part of the original plan. In fact, the interview began with an entirely different theme. The original purpose was to explore the issue of the declining birthrate and seek solutions. It is commonly believed that the increasing number of people not marrying is a cause of the declining birthrate. In Japan, there are few children born out of wedlock, and it is common knowledge that people should have and raise children after getting married. If this is the case, then increasing the number of people getting married will lead to solving the declining birthrate problem. It is particularly important to increase the number of couples among the younger generation, and the key is to create an environment that encourages them to get married. To do this, I first needed to understand the younger generation's views on marriage, love, lifestyle, and life. With this in mind, I began interviewing young people. I intended to first listen to the young women, then the young men, and then interview the operators of matchmaking and dating sites and marriage agencies, and compile the article. However, the interviews were not easy. As I had expected, they were reticent to speak. To them, I was just an unfamiliar old man. Even though I was introduced by an acquaintance, their wariness and distrust would not easily be dispelled. Moreover, they would suddenly start asking about marriage and romance, so it was only natural that they would be wary. In today's social climate, where stalking and murder cases targeting young women are on the rise, their wariness and distrust were actually quite natural. I interviewed them mostly during the daytime on weekdays, at coffee shops, but their responses were often just "huh" or "I don't know," and I was beginning to get tired of it, but gradually, I began to see some progress. While most of the women were literally one-off encounters, I met a few of them several times, and some of them began to open up to me. One was a 20-year-old university student studying economics. The other was a 24-year-old woman working at an apparel shop in Shinjuku.

The university student said, "Marriage is still a long way off, so I'm not interested in it." She hopes to work for a foreign trading company, and for now, she wants to focus on

studying English and club activities. She didn't seem particularly interested in romance. "It's technically a coeducational school, but it feels almost like an all-girls college, and there are only frivolous guys," she laughed.

On the other hand, she was highly socially conscious, and asked me a lot of questions about Japan's challenges and future. She showed interest in topics that are likely to become major issues in the future, such as "What will happen to nursing care as we become an aging society?" and "The sudden increase in foreigners has made Japan an immigrant nation?" I offered my own views, and she responded with her own.

"I wanted to talk about this," she muttered.

"Don't you talk with your friends?" "No, I don't. Everyone avoids difficult topics." "What do you usually talk about?" "We talk about food, events, etc. Basically, we talk about having fun." Like her, many young people likely have vague concerns about Japan's future, even if they don't say it out loud. Her desire to work for a foreign company rather than a Japanese one is likely a reflection of these concerns.

"The declining birthrate is a social issue, but what do you think about having children?" I asked. "I haven't thought about it at all. It feels like something so far away. Right now isn't the time for that," she replied. Perhaps marriage and childbirth are premature topics for a 20-year-old woman. In fact, I was similar when I was 20. Marriage was never a topic of conversation with friends.

She works at an apparel shop and was also hesitant about marriage. She's 24, but doesn't have a boyfriend. She's quiet, with a gentle, old-fashioned air about her. She'd look perfectly suited to sipping tea on the veranda of her rural home. Originally from Yamagata Prefecture, after graduating from high school, she worked as a nail artist in her hometown for a while, but the income wasn't great. She decided to move to Tokyo, hoping to find work there anyway. When she first arrived, she stayed with a friend while job hunting. However, she couldn't find work in nail art, so she decided to work in an apparel shop to get by.

When I first met her, she was extremely reserved. She was unfriendly and always seemed to stand in the way of my neighbors, which was quite an annoyance. However, after a while, her guard seemed to ease and she began to quietly express her opinions, and before long, she became so comfortable that she made me laugh with her playful jokes.

When I asked her, "Why don't you want to get married?" she tilted her head and said, "Hmm," and added, "It just doesn't seem like fun."

"Are you married, Kitajima?" "No, I'm not." "Why?" "Hmm, I wonder," and when I tilted my head this time, she asked me admonishingly, "Because it doesn't seem like fun, right?" "Now that you mention it, I guess that makes sense."

In this manner, my conversation with her continued, with me unable to tell if I was conducting an interview or just daydreaming.

"Do you want to work as a nail artist in the future?"

"I would like to. I love nails, after all. But maybe I don't feel as strongly about it as I used to. I'm fine with either way now."

"But don't you have a vague idea of what you want to be in the future?" I asked. "Hmm," she groaned for a while, then suddenly, her expression took on a mischievous look, and she muttered one word.

"I want to die soon."

She was probably trying to fluster me so she could gloat. Meanwhile, her answer brought me back to a strange recollection. When I was around 20 years old, I too was of the opinion that I would be happy to live until I was 30. I had a strong sense of doom that there was no point in living longer in a world like this, and to some extent I was content with living a life devouring every moment. However, as I entered my late twenties and gained a bit more common sense, I began to think that I should try to live at least that long, since Akutagawa Ryunosuke lived to 36, Dazai Osamu to 39, Sato Taishi to 41, and Mishima Yukio to 45. And before I knew it, I'd reached this age, busy with work and other things. I guess young people, both now and in the past, long for an early death.

"When do you think you want to die early?"

"Like 35."

"That's way too early. You'd be better off living until at least 50."

I had no basis for saying 50, but I reflexively replied.

"But life seems boring. I think it'll get even more boring from here on out..." she muttered as if it were someone else's.

"You're still young, so there are fun things to do."

"I guess so," she tilted her head and looked into my face, "What do you enjoy, Kitajima?"

In fact, somewhere in my heart, I had felt the same way about her view that it would become impossible to get enough sleep.

"Oh, so that's not the case," she said, clapping her hands as if she could see right through me.

"No, no, that's not the case. If I had to say, I'd say it's work." I replied, as if I was just adding, "That's a lie," without a moment's hesitation. As expected, young women have sharp sensibilities. My old, fox-like nature didn't seem to get through to them.

"There's no way work is fun," she asserted with conviction.

"Indeed. That's a lie. That was a lie." I reluctantly admitted my lie. "But if you want to call it the adult way of doing things, then that's the adult way to do things," I said, adding

an unnecessary explanation.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," she said, laughing heartily.

Her mentality seemed almost the same as when I was younger. Oddly pessimistic, but somehow carefree. It would be an exaggeration to say that I was completely immersed in despair about the world, yet even felt a sense of stability, but that was the impression I got.

I'm a member of the so-called baby boomer junior generation, and in the 1990s, it was expected that my generation would have more children as they reached the peak of childbearing. However, this did not happen. As the baby boomer junior generation reached their 40s in 2015, it became clear that these expectations were an illusion. Since then, Japan's population decline has been accelerating. Our generation, having been thoroughly instilled with ideas of freedom, independence, self-realization, and personal responsibility, has prioritized self-establishment (identity) in our lives, regardless of gender. It would be nice if "self-establishment" equaled marriage and childbirth, but in fact, this is rare, and most people sought a place to establish themselves through work or hobbies. Those who successfully established themselves may seek marriage and childbirth as the next step, but for others, marriage and childbirth remain forever secondary.

Anyway, one day, I decided to go to a yakiniku restaurant with my girlfriend. During our casual conversation, the topic of dinner came up. "I only had a sandwich for dinner last night," she told me, and when I asked her why, she said she was trying to save money. She said, "I want to eat my fill sometimes," so we decided to go out for yakiniku, her favorite. We went to a yakiniku restaurant in Shinjuku's Kabukicho, and she gobbled down various kinds of meat. We killed time while eating, engaging in meaningless conversation, but at certain points in the conversation, she would suddenly remember something and visibly contort her expression, saying things like, "I don't want to go to work tomorrow," or "I hate my job." At first, I brushed it off, but she continued to complain, so I casually asked her why.

"Do you have a meeting tomorrow, or are you dealing with complaints?" She shook her head and replied, "That's not my job." Something suddenly clicked for me. Outside the window, the neon signs of Kabukicho blazed brightly.

"So you're working part-time?" I asked, unconsciously lowering my voice.

"Yes."

"Maybe a night job? Like a hostess club?"

"No. Not at night. I can't do hostess clubs. I can't handle alcohol, and I'm not good at talking to strangers."

"Oh, so you have other jobs too?" If it was a daytime job, there would be no need to keep my voice down. I raised my voice and leaned back in my chair. "What kind of work do you do?" I asked casually.

She replied "Hmm," looking troubled for a moment, then, as if determined, looked me in the eye and answered clearly.

"Soapland."

"Huh?" I couldn't help but ask again at her unexpected answer, and she asked back, "Do you mind?"

"I don't mind, but during the day on a weekday?"

"Yes."

I wasn't surprised that she worked at a soapland, but I felt strange that she was working during the day.

"Maybe you play with hosts or something?" I timidly looked at her face, and she flatly denied it.

"So, do you have any debts?" she said. When I asked her if she needed a large sum of money, she replied no. "Are you thinking about studying abroad?" She seemed annoyed by my probing, and replied, "For rent." That answer was also a surprise to me. According to her, she lives alone in a studio apartment in Nishi-Shinjuku 5-chome. Nishi-Shinjuku 5-chome is known as a commuter town for Kabukicho, and is home to many people who work in the nightlife industry. The rent for this studio apartment is ridiculously high. I rent a house in Nakano-Sakaue, and it's twice as much.

"Instead of living in such a luxury apartment, why don't you rent a cheaper place? That way you won't have to work a part-time job," I suggested, but she insisted it was her only option. Listening more carefully, I discovered there was a compelling reason for her situation. With her salary at the apparel shop, she wouldn't be able to rent even a studio apartment worth 50,000-60,000 yen, as she would fail the real estate inspection. While she could probably rent an apartment without a bath and with a shared toilet, it's still a tough environment for a young woman. There are also security issues, such as being targeted by stalkers. Moreover, in recent years, most cheap apartments with no bath and shared toilets have been demolished and replaced with high-end condominiums.

The one-room apartment she lives in is quite old and would normally cost around ¥60,000 to ¥70,000. Even so, the rent is more than three times that. It sounds outrageous, but the tenant screening process is lenient, so she was able to rent it. She finally found a place after being rejected by various real estate agents. She must have

had enough of apartment hunting. For a while, she managed to cover her rent with her salary and savings, but her savings were running out, so she decided to take a job at a lucrative soapland.

It's sometimes said that the sex industry serves as a safety net for impoverished women. From what she says, this seems to be true. According to the "Night World White Paper" compiled by Grow As People, a general incorporated association that supports women in the nightlife industry, there are approximately 300,000 women in their 20s working in sex establishments across the country. Incidentally, one would think that such businesses generally thrive at night, so do they really attract customers during the day? When I interviewed them about this later, I was told that there are now so many different types of establishments that it's impossible to keep track, with all kinds of services being offered, morning and evening alike. When you think about it, the working styles of all kinds of jobs are becoming more diverse, and there's practically no division of time. The nightlife industry is likely no exception.

Incidentally, a few months later, she completely quit the nightlife business and enrolled in a childcare vocational school in Tokyo. I invited her out to dinner to celebrate. She spoke with a bright outlook, saying things like, "This time, I'm going to become a childcare worker," "I'm starting over," and "I want to let go of the past." I responded with unusual fervor, saying things like, "You should forget the past," and "It's practically nonexistent." She then smiled broadly and said, "Yes, thank you. That's why we can't see each other anymore." When I asked her back, "What?" she clearly stated, "I want to let go of the past, so I can no longer see anyone who knows about it." I thought to myself, "Oh, so I'm the one being cut off, too," but since I'd responded so enthusiastically, I couldn't be bothered to cling to her and just accepted, "Yeah, I see." I haven't heard anything about her since.

Anyway, listening to her talk about her job at an apparel shop, I became increasingly interested in the poverty issue that has been pointed out in public. While this interview originally began as part of a study into the declining birthrate, it might also be worthwhile to pivot it to the issue of poverty. The issues of poverty and declining birthrate are surely linked to one another to some degree. However, I didn't think of her as a poor woman. She was well-dressed, intelligent, and willing to work. Whatever her circumstances, she lived in an apartment with a higher rent than me, and according to online information, some hostesses earn 1-2 million yen a month. This makes her far wealthier than me. But she was constantly under the pressure of poverty. She moved to Tokyo in search of a bright job, but struggled with the basics of food, clothing, and shelter. She wandered around looking for a place to belong, and after exhausting every avenue,

she reluctantly became a hostess. Can this really be called a safety net? Rather, aren't stereotypical regulations and silent intolerance the unwritten dark route that drives vulnerable women like her into the nightlife industry? I began by interviewing a real estate agent. It's said that there are more real estate agencies than convenience stores, and many of my friends and acquaintances work in the real estate industry. Another defining feature of the real estate industry is the high proportion of individuals who operate as sole proprietors or freelancers. Turns out, the real estate industry has a valid reason for this. They use the slang terms "flee" and "accident" to describe a tenant who disappears without warning. Not only are renters behind, but they also have to deal with the belongings left behind in the apartment, leaving them with a double whammy. Low-income earners are the most obvious candidates for tenants who tend to disappear, and while "unemployed" and "freeters" are often worthy of caution, it seems that those working in the entertainment industry are also a target for vigilance. While they may earn a high income while working, it usually doesn't last, and it's impossible to know when they'll lose their income. From my own experience as a real estate professional, those working in the entertainment industry are highly likely to leave.

As I listened to these stories, a patchy image of society formed in my mind. As the population declines, the increase in vacant homes and rooms becomes a challenge. At the same time, the hurdles to obtaining rental contracts have become higher and more complicated, making it difficult for everyone to find housing. While it's unclear at this point whether this situation is temporary or permanent, it's clear that changes in social structure are having an impact.

Recently, so-called alibi companies have become increasingly common, and real estate agents are reportedly being cautious when conducting their applications. Alibi companies are essentially paper companies. They issue fake certificates and other documents to clients (alibi company users) to make it appear as if they are full-time employees of the company. Many users are people in the entertainment industry. In simple terms, the process goes like this: Let's say a man named A, who is unemployed and has no income, is trying to sign a rental contract. He pays a fee to use an alibi company and tells the real estate agent that he is a full-time employee of an alibi company with an annual income of 5 million yen. The real estate agent then verifies the alibi company during the application screening process. The alibi company will announce to the real estate agent that "A is a full-time employee with an annual salary of 500 yen" and send a certificate-like document. This allows A, who is actually unemployed and has no income, to sign a rental contract. From the real estate agent's perspective, this is

tantamount to being scammed, and tenants like A are likely to flee. However, it is also true that there is a certain segment of the population that cannot find housing without resorting to such tactics. In that sense, alibi companies could be called a kind of poverty business that reflects the current social climate.

Several hostesses I met later in my interview also mentioned alibi companies. In fact, some of them said they had rented rooms using alibi companies. Alibi companies seem to be a familiar presence for these women. One hostess was living in a dormitory run by the club where she worked, but her stay was limited, so she had to find a new place quickly. However, she complained that she was having difficulty finding a new home. She was aware of my mention of alibi companies, but she said that real estate agents also have measures in place to protect against them, making it difficult. "I pay my rent regularly, so why does this have to happen to me?" she sighed, and I felt strangely sorry for her. She said she'd seen many of her colleagues run away, but she'd never run away herself, and she'd never fallen behind on rent.

After gaining some background information from the real estate agent, I next turned to adult entertainment establishments. However, they rejected my interview requests with open hostility, blatantly citing privacy as an excuse, saying, "There's no way they can talk about that." I wasn't trying to get the hostesses' personal information. I just wanted to get a general idea of the trends, but their insistence on "privacy" got me nowhere.

In recent years, sensitivity to privacy and personal information has increased dramatically, and privacy is often used as an excuse for anything. I heard this story from an acquaintance of mine: My friend had been hospitalized due to an illness, so I called the friend to visit, but there was no response. So I called the hospital to confirm, but the hospital staff told me they couldn't tell me whether the friend was hospitalized or not, due to personal information. My friend just wanted to visit his friend and asked the hospital staff if they could tell him whether he was hospitalized or not, but they wouldn't agree. They kept repeating, "It's personal information, so I can't tell you. Please ask him or his family." He couldn't get through to him by phone, and he didn't have his family's contact information. He gave up on visiting, but a while later, his friend called and learned that he'd already been released from the hospital and was traveling, missing the call. My friend was outraged, saying, "They could at least tell me whether he was in the hospital. I don't understand what the problem with personal information is." There are countless examples like this. The excessive respect for privacy and personal information, like golden rules, creates barriers to proper human relationships and impedes legitimate social activities. What a strange world we live in. Of course, privacy and personal

information must be respected. Abuse by third parties is never tolerated. However, the current situation lacks balance, and when we try to get to the truth, these privacy and personal information can become a threat, causing trouble. After failing to contact the sex industry establishments, I pursued my research through other channels. However, everyone I spoke to was uniformly reticent. One of them had previously founded a nonprofit organization supporting AV actresses and hostesses, but has now closed the organization and severed all ties with people who work in the sex industry. "There's no benefit to being involved with such people," he said. He never spoke again. Another journalist frequently interacted with hostesses, but he never asked the women's names or backgrounds; he simply listened to their stories. He never bothered to verify the veracity of their stories. His impression was that hostesses love and excel at telling stories of misfortune. He often hears stories about women growing up poor or being repeatedly deceived by men, but he doesn't know or need to know whether these stories are true. Incidentally, when I explained the purpose of my interview, he advised me to avoid getting involved with hostesses. When I asked why, he said, "Such interviews never go well," "They only lead to trouble," "You'll end up with gangsters or gigolos," and "You'll be taken advantage of." While going through these exchanges, I used various connections to make contact with hostesses.

The first thing that puzzled me about interviewing hostesses was how casually they would stand by their appointments. Even when I made an appointment to meet and set a time and place, they almost always stood me down. At best they would explain the reason by email or something, but most of the time it was a silent betrayal. When this happened repeatedly, I could understand why they emphasized that it was best not to get involved, but I treated it as just my job, and instead of showing anger or pursuing the matter further, I decided to just go with the flow and be patient. When I was lucky enough to make contact, I followed my usual etiquette. That is, I would hand over my business card, introduce myself properly, and then move the conversation forward. What was interesting was their initial reaction. It was the same old same old, "Oh, so it's really you Kitajima?" "Underclass" (by Kenji Hashimoto, published by Chikuma Shinsho) sheds light on the hidden underclass that is spreading throughout Japan, using quantitative data in a scholarly manner. The book defines the "underclass" as non-regular workers, excluding part-time housewives who work to supplement their household income, part-time executives and managers, and qualified and skilled professionals. In terms of occupation, the majority of workers are in service jobs (cooks, waiters, sales clerks, home helpers, caregivers, etc.) and manual occupations (construction workers, construction workers, drivers, delivery people, etc.). 37.5% of the population is married, 34.1% are

unmarried, 17.6% are divorced, and 10.8% are widowed.

The hostesses I was able to contact, both former and current, were all in service jobs, in their 20s to 40s, and were both single and divorced. The book points out that many members of the underclass come from disadvantaged backgrounds. The report argues that economic poverty, a lack of cultural resources, a lack of investment in education, and discord and violence in the home result in a cycle of poverty being passed down from parent to child. Indeed, some hostesses spent their childhoods in completely unreliable families. In one case, when she was in the early grades of elementary school, her father's business went bankrupt, plunging her family into poverty. In her own words, "the whole family was on the brink of suicide." Her mother somehow managed to stop her, but her father subsequently disappeared. Her mother supported the family by working in the entertainment industry.

Most of these women concealed their real names, ages, and hometowns. It was understandable they were cautious, meeting a man for the first time. I assumed they would open up after a period of interaction and building a certain level of trust. However, in the end, not a single one of them ever opened up to me. Then, one day, while chatting with a hostess at a coffee shop in Tokyo, I happened to learn her real name. As she was taking something out of her bag, she happened to notice a document with her name on it. "Oh, so her real name is XX-chan." When I casually told her, she became extremely flustered and a strange argument ensued.

"I really don't have any money," "I don't want to have sex in private," she began babbling away in rapid-fire succession. Normally a calm and collected woman, she was unusually agitated at this time, hysterically repeating "please," "please." I was overwhelmed by her madness and could only do soothe her repeatedly. It took a while to calm her down. Gradually, she regained her composure, and just when I thought I was relieved, her madness turned to anger and she criticized me with a sharp glare.

"For a girl, having her identity known can be life-threatening. You're so insensitive." With these words, she confessed to a bitter past in which a customer found out her identity, threatened to tell her parents and friends that she was a hostess, and took several million yen in hush money.

"If your parents find out, you'll be disowned. Some girls have committed suicide from the shock," she said.

"If she was being threatened, why didn't you talk to the manager of the club or the police?" I thought I was giving her very basic advice, but she retorted, "The club doesn't

like trouble, so they want you to deal with it yourself, and I don't want to go to the police because that would mean revealing my identity." In short, she had no choice but to accept it. For her, having her identity discovered was the same as losing her life. She would accept being extorted, and would accept being raped, and would accept it. She said she had seen many hostesses commit suicide because they couldn't bear such circumstances. Kabukicho's "Host Street" is notorious for its frequent suicides by jumping. There are several buildings there known as "cursed buildings." The "Dairoku Toa Building" and "Sankei 20 Building" are particularly well-known, and they frequently see female suicides. In October 2018, a woman jumped to her death. According to reports, the woman owed money to a host club and was dumped by the host she loved. While this was believed to be the cause of her suicide, this was not actually the case. The woman who committed suicide was actually a colleague of a hostess I had met. Apparently, the hostess had been forced into sexual relationships and extorted for money after customers discovered her identity. As we talked, she glared at me and said, "Whenever a hostess commits suicide, the media immediately writes that she's a host obsessed girl, but not all of them are like that." Her favorite saying was, "I want to live a quiet life." The nightlife industry is not a good fit for that. That's why I encouraged her to change jobs. "If she could change jobs, she would have done so a long time ago." She had changed jobs several times in the past, working in regional cities. However, after a while, she returned to Tokyo and began working as a hostess, eking out a living. It's said that once you're hooked on the nightlife industry, it's difficult to escape. Some say it's because you can make a lot of money in a short amount of time, and the rewards are hard to forget. While this is true, it's also a bit off the mark. Even when women start fresh and take on new jobs, their moods remain muted. This is because they have to be constantly on guard to hide their pasts. This is more stressful than one might imagine.

As a bit of an aside, one woman, currently a writer, was an adult video actress in her youth. She explained with a bitter grimace, "Time kind of stops in the world of the Internet. Not just for me, but for others, notable past actions and statements remain semi-permanently in real time."

The Internet is a convenient tool, but its anonymity and media nature can also make it a dangerous weapon. This characteristic may be similar to the relationship between comedy manga and horror manga. The essence of comedy manga is to corner a frightened, fleeing target and enjoy their actions and expressions, while the essence of horror manga is the terror of desperately fleeing from someone who is relentlessly pursuing them. For many hostesses, the internet is a tool of fear. They refer to the revelation of their status as a hostess or their past as a hostess as "being exposed." For these women, who hate

being exposed more than anything, the internet is a time bomb. There's no telling when or where it might be used as a tool for exposing or threatening. You might see posts like this on online message boards: "The real name of B, who works at A, is Xxx Xxx(Her name is redacted)." This is usually followed by trivial posts like "Remove the redacted part" or "Show her real name." To an outsider, it may appear to be nothing more than a joke between two enthusiasts, but in reality, it's a message of extortion. Xxx Xxx(she) knows the man who posted the online post, and he has some information about her and is making unreasonable demands. The posts were threatening to redact and reveal her real name if she didn't comply with their demands. Of course, not all online posts are threatening, but that's what happened to the hostess I worked with. In an effort to rebuild her life, she would take a daytime job where she didn't have to worry about being criticized, but somehow her past job would become known to those around her, she would feel uncomfortable at work, quit, and go back to the nightlife industry; this pattern repeated itself several times. Because of this, she is unusually sensitive about both personal information and the internet.

"I'm not a stalker or a threat or anything like that. I just want to be friends and be honest with you."

I'll never forget what she said when I said this.

"It would be weird to tell the truth, and there's no point in building a relationship of trust."

And then I realized.

"It seems we live in completely different worlds. I guess I've reached my limit. There's no point in getting any more involved."

While each person's life principles are their own, and I should respect that, I cannot live in a world where lies are legitimate and trust is meaningless. Human society has always been bleak, but there is always a sense of obligation. However, I could understand her feelings. A regular customer with whom she had built a trusting relationship suddenly turned stalker and unreasonably threatened her. Repeated experiences like this from a young age inevitably lead to a distrust of people. Furthermore, if strong pressure pulls you back out of that world even when you try to leave, your distrust of society will only intensify.

Grow As People, a general incorporated association, primarily provides employment support for hostesses. The organization states, "We do not reject the sex industry. Our goal is to improve working conditions. Specifically, we support second careers and focus on preventing isolation." According to the organization, there is a "40-year-old barrier"

in the sex industry. This refers to the difficulty of working and the resulting decline in income as one ages. Hostesses who seek consultation range from their 20s to their 50s, with the most common complaint being, "I want to quit, but I don't know how." Meanwhile, there are few consultations about financial or stalking issues. A survey of hostesses' attitudes revealed that 60% continue working for no particular reason and hope to eventually change jobs. Furthermore, many hostesses avoid social interaction and become isolated due to concerns about "not wanting family or acquaintances to hear about their work," "running into a customer on the street," or "being found out they are a hostess." Incidentally, the reason many hostesses are so wary of revealing their identities online is due to the proliferation of online solicitation. When posting personal information online for online sales, certain information can be linked, revealing their identities. The organization's staff repeatedly asked, "You're surprisingly good at getting close to hostesses. How did you do that?" This is because they struggle to meet and consult with hostesses. Apparently, in some cases, it took two or three years for a hostess to actually meet after contacting them to discuss their situation. In my case, most of my meetings were one-off, and they repeatedly backed out. Even when I did meet, personal information like my name and age was almost always false. In other words, I met them when I had the chance and listened to their stories, so I'm not sure if I could say I became close.

According to the organization's research, the highest-earning 18-25-year-olds earn more than ¥430,000 per month for just 13 working days. The women I contacted seemed to be earning twice that amount. When I mentioned this to them, I was told that the hostesses I contacted were highly professional, a rare breed among hostesses overall.

"They probably wanted Kitajima to be their patron, because professional hostesses want patrons."

The organization's understanding is that "social understanding of hostesses is extremely low." Indeed, I repeatedly heard them say things like, "We're not treated like human beings." When asked specifically about the treatment they receive, they evade discussion, but it seems that simply being a hostess often results in unscrupulous treatment from those around them. In addition, they face the risk of being stalked, raped, or extorted by customers. Prostitution is prohibited by law in Japan and is not recognized as a profession. This may also be a factor in the harsh social stigma. Because prostitution exists, but is treated as if it doesn't, its true nature is not understood, and discrimination

and prejudice are easily fostered. While understanding of sexual minorities such as LGBTQ is increasing, hostesses remain largely ignored. These issues could be improved by granting them professional status—in other words, citizenship. If there is resistance to recognizing the occupation of "prostitute," we could define a new, more nuanced occupation, such as "bus caddy" or "body coordinator." Once it is established as a profession, the government would be able to collect taxes from them. Professional status would improve the social standing of hostesses. That being said, many hostesses would stubbornly refuse to be given a professional status, because all they seek from their job is money. They are strict about this, and don't care about things like fulfillment or pride; they're happy just to earn one more yen. They'd probably rather maintain the status quo than have to pay taxes and have their income reduced because of their professional status.

One hostess said, "Even though it's a place like this, we're strict with money. We give them cash on the spot, as promised, depending on the number of customers, so it's fair. That's why I can continue."

She used to work in restaurants, but she experienced many frustrating experiences, such as not being paid or not being paid the amount promised. On the other hand, she says she's never experienced such frustrations in the entertainment industry.

Aside from that, a journalist familiar with the sex industry points out, "The current market demand is for older hostesses in their 50s and 60s. This is because the main customer base is aging, with people in their 60s and 70s." If that's the case, it could become a job that overcomes the "40-year-old barrier" and allows people to work for their entire lives, and if it's done well, it could even lead to the creation of new industries in an aging society.

The declining birthrate is considered Japan's greatest challenge today. However, this issue did not suddenly emerge. It's a long-standing problem that has been rumored since the 1970s. With a few exceptions, the birthrate remained above 2 until 1974. In 1975, it dropped to 1.91. Since then, it has steadily declined, reaching a record low of 1.20 in 2024. The number of births fell below 700,000. While the situation continues to worsen, neither the government nor the public has simply sat idly by. Various policies have been implemented to stem the tide of the declining birthrate. However, the situation has shown no sign of improvement. In Japan, out-of-wedlock births are extremely rare, and

marriage and childbirth are often associated. Therefore, measures to combat the declining birthrate have tended to favor marriage. The traditional approach has been to survey single people about their reasons for not marrying and then develop policies based on their responses. Common responses from both men and women in these surveys include "financially inadequate" and "unable to find a partner." These voices are reflected in measures to combat the declining birthrate. This raises a burning question: Why has the problem persisted despite the country's long-term efforts to address it? British economic analyst David Atkinson, in his book "The New Productivity Nation" (Toyo Keizai Shinposha), writes about Japan: "When forced to change, Japan is able to change all at once. This is because the Japanese are not good at proactive responses, but they are the world's best at reactive responses." In other words, once they recognize a problem, they have the ability to quickly solve it. And yet, for some reason, the declining birthrate remains a problem that shows no signs of improvement. There are only two possible reasons for this: either the approach to the problem is flawed, or they only talk about it and have no intention of seriously solving it.

In my interviews, I tried to avoid being bound by conventional wisdom, to not restrict myself, and to just go with the flow. As a result, the topic shifted from the declining birthrate to poverty, and then to privacy and personal information. If we simply follow this trend, the key to overcoming the declining birthrate lies in privacy and personal information. Changing the way we handle privacy and personal information will lead to a solution to the declining birthrate problem. Some may find this ridiculous. To be honest, I too find myself scratching my head. So when I'm pressed to provide evidence, I become flustered. In that sense, this is an outrageous argument. However, I'd like to stick to it for a little while longer. I'd like to delve deeper into the hypothesis that the declining birthrate problem is a privacy and personal information problem. No matter what the issue, its causes are complex. It's like a tangled thread; it takes effort to untangle it, but once you unravel one strand, the whole thing unravels surprisingly easily.

The declining birthrate problem is complex. However, if we can identify one key factor, it could be resolved quite smoothly. "Lack of financial security" and "inability to find a partner" are likely some of the factors, but they're not the key factors. Just looking around me, I see countless families who seem happy despite being financially strapped, and there are also quite a few wealthy people who remain single. It's hard to believe that people can't find a partner. The internet is overflowing with services that help people meet, and matchmaking parties are popping up everywhere. If you're willing, you can find a partner. An acquaintance of mine had been single for a long time, but when he

started thinking about marriage, he joined a dating app he'd never considered before. He soon found a partner and got married.

Privacy and personal information, in other words, are the foundation of individualization. Individualization, or personal economy, means that the way we live our lives, including work and play, is completed on a personal level. The fact that we as individuals are at the center of our lifeworld remains essentially the same today as it was in the past. However, with the progress of modernization, the individual at the center of our lifeworld has become stronger and more powerful, even becoming an absolute entity. Simply put, "I am everything." Privacy and personal information were once like a thin coat worn by individuals, but as individuals have become stronger and more powerful, privacy and personal information have also become stronger and more powerful, becoming like iron armor. In this situation, you can't touch the other person, but you can't just touch them. Deepening your relationship with them is difficult unless you make a conscious effort to communicate. Being very conscious means, for example, clearly having the desire to get married and actively using dating apps. While there have been people in the past who were clearly intent on finding a partner, more often than not, people got married or had children through chance encounters or dramatic events. Perhaps the transformation of privacy and personal information from a thin coat to an iron armor has reduced such opportunities, exacerbating the declining birthrate problem.

That said, I don't intend to downplay privacy and personal information or advocate returning it to a thin coat. As we all know, privacy and personal information can be used without permission and used as material for fraud and blackmail, so they must be given more importance than ever. However, the more importance is placed on them, the more they turn into an iron armor, making it more difficult for good people to naturally interact with each other. This is a dilemma that only grows.

In his books such as "The Problem Isn't Britain, It's the EU" (Bunshun Shinsho), French historian Emmanuel Todd points out that nihilism lies behind the rampant economic supremacy that is rampant across the globe. For people who have fallen into a state of emptiness and can no longer see value in anything, economic growth is the only way to maintain their identity. Beyond this lies libertarianism, which pursues complete personal and economic freedom. On the other hand, there are those who argue that economic growth is no longer necessary, and that if we share things effectively around the world, we can ensure a free, equal, and sustainable life even without money. Beyond

this lies communitarianism, which emphasizes the value of community.

As such, many different ideological vectors are running through the modern world. Even within Japanese society, several trends are clashing. I see two major trends intermingling. One is a view of society that develops by flexibly navigating rapidly changing times, while the other is a view of society that turns its back on trends and insists on adhering to traditional ways. Although these societies are completely different in nature, they previously blended together like a layered structure, and somehow managed to get along. Because the economy was growing overall, both those who went against the trend and those who turned their backs on it were able to enjoy the fruits of the labor and fulfill their identities, which probably allowed people to tolerate each other's differences. A typically Japanese, easy-going relationship prevailed, and people felt a certain comfort.

The reason why societies that had been integrated in some way began to diverge was because the economy matured and growth slowed. To make matters worse, the arrival of the information society made it difficult for society as a whole to enjoy the benefits. Those who jumped on the bandwagon reap the rewards, while those who couldn't, missed out, or didn't try to jump on the bandwagon lose out. From the perspective of economic rationality, this is natural, but it's not fun for those who lose out. It's tempting to start screaming about disparities, discrimination, and inequality. If we could renew our mature economic structure and set a course for overall growth, complaints of inequality and discrimination would likely fade away. But that's a pipe dream. We've passed the industrial age and are now in the midst of an information age. Unlike industrial societies, information societies emphasize diversity over uniformity. Individual spirit is more important than strong teamwork. That's why diversity is so important in information societies.

"A society that develops by flexibly weathering rapidly changing trends" and "A society that turns its back on the trends and insists on traditional ways" are not comparable. Neither is superior or inferior. Both have their pros and cons. However, as a country facing challenges ahead of us, Japan has no choice but to focus on "a society that develops by flexibly weathering rapidly changing trends." Otherwise, we won't be able to envision a scenario for recovery and will simply await decline. History teaches us this. "When Civilizations Decline" (by Kosaka Masataka, Shincho Sensho) is a book that summarizes the fall of the Roman Empire, as well as the rise and fall of Venice and the Netherlands. Published in 1981, it is considered one of Japan's greatest classics. Using Venice and the Netherlands as examples, the book depicts the fate of trading nations. Both were nations that built their wealth by purchasing materials from overseas, processing them, and

selling them overseas. While they achieved great success through trade, nations that rely on trade are always unstable. Because they are critically affected by global events, they place a premium on peace. While this is a good thing in itself, the pacifism of trading nations is prone to hypocrisy and cunning.

"Trading nations avoid war or try to avoid it. However, they make no noble efforts to create peace; they simply take advantage of the international relations created by more powerful nations."

Dealing skillfully with constantly changing international situations can be exhausting. Moreover, because this response is ultimately a compromise, repeated compromises lead to a loss of confidence in one's own way of life. Add to this the inevitable decadence that occurs when a country becomes successful and prosperous as a trading nation. Society then becomes rife with divisive tendencies, with many people seeking a return to a more peaceful way of life, a nostalgic, comfortable life. However, losing the ability to adapt to new changes will only lead to decline. We must acknowledge that the growing desire for a nostalgic, comfortable life in a trading nation like Japan is inevitable, even destined. Moreover, if we think about it carefully, there is no country today that is not a trading nation. This is why people in every country are growing tired and losing confidence in their own way of life. Add decadence to this mix and a divided society seeking momentary pleasures is fostered, leading to rifts between people. This is the true nature of a divided society, and perhaps the reality of a global society in which populism is rampant and chaos is at its height.

Chapter 4: How to Deal with Science and Technology

Japan's current digitalization lags, and it's sometimes mocked as a "digitally backward country." According to the "World Digital Competitiveness Rankings 2024" published by the International Institute for Management Development (IMD) in Switzerland, Japan ranked 31st, with Singapore in first place, Switzerland in second, Denmark in third, the United States in fourth, and Sweden in fifth. Furthermore, the "World E-Government Rankings" published by the United Nations in 2022 ranked Denmark in first, Finland in second, South Korea in third, New Zealand in fourth, and Sweden in fifth, with Japan in 14th place. The top rankings are dominated by countries with small populations. Sweden has a population of around 10 million, while Denmark, Finland, and Singapore all have populations just under 6 million. One point that emerges from this is that the smaller a country's population, the more easily it can realize the benefits of digital technology. This is easily understood by taking the example of applying for a resident registration card.

Smaller countries also have fewer civil servants. In the pre-digital era, citizens had to go to the government office to apply for a resident registration card, which required waiting all day. Citizens have to give up their jobs, and tiring civil servants with menial tasks is a waste of taxpayer money. Meanwhile, populous countries have many civil servants. Even if you apply for a resident registration card at the city hall, you only have to wait an hour to get it. Japanese people are efficient, so it only takes about 10 minutes. Neither the citizen nor the civil servant feels much of a burden.

For small-populated countries, digital technology is a convenient tool that liberates citizens and society from hopeless inefficiency. It's not a matter of like or dislike, or strength or weakness; it has become an essential tool for survival. Japan will eventually walk this path, too. Like it or not, it has no choice but to walk this path to survive. The idea is to renew the country with a population of 45 million and a working population of just under 20 million in 2100. Let's assume these efforts proceed smoothly and a digital society is realized ahead of schedule in 2060. At that time, the population will be just under 90 million and the working population will be approximately 38 million. In a society based on a population of 45 million and a workforce of just under 20 million, a population of 90 million and a workforce of 38 million would likely lead to a surplus of workers, leading to higher unemployment and other concerns that social unrest might actually increase. What I want to emphasize here is the high scalability of digital technology. Even in a society based on a population of 45 million, if scalability is demonstrated, I believe it could cover approximately 90 million people. This would create a pseudo-demographic bonus, which could lead to a comfortable economic cycle.

What can be done to transform Japan into a society that can survive with a population of 45 million and a workforce of just under 20 million? If nothing is done, society as a whole will shrink by about one-third, so if nothing is done, the current GDP of around 600 trillion yen will fall to around 177 trillion yen, the same level as Italy, Canada, and South Korea today. Meanwhile, Japan's per capita GDP, considered a measure of wealth, will be around 4.8 million yen in 2024 (estimated by the IMF at \$32,859). The highest figure is Luxembourg, at approximately ¥12.44 million. Luxembourg is a small country with a population of 570,000, and its economy is specialized in the financial industry. As a tax haven, it has attracted the headquarters and European headquarters of multinational corporations, resulting in a large nominal GDP.

Japan's GDP is fourth in the world, but its per capita GDP ranks around 30th, which is not so impressive. The reasons cited for this include a growing elderly population and

sluggish labor productivity growth due to slow digitalization. The first step in transitioning to a society with a population of 45 million and a workforce of just under 20 million is maintaining the current GDP. To secure ¥600 trillion for a population of 45 million, the only way to achieve a per capita GDP of ¥600 trillion is to raise it above Luxembourg's. From a positive perspective, even if digitalization is lagging, with a per capita GDP of around ¥4.8 million, it is not a dream to double or triple that per capita GDP by rapidly promoting digitalization. To put it very simply, if a job that previously required three people can now be done by one person using digital technology, labor productivity will triple. And if that income increases threefold, that person's consumption habits will also change significantly. People who used to shop at 100-yen shops will likely start going to department stores. If people start purchasing expensive, high-quality items rather than cheap, so-so items, it will stimulate consumption and improve their standard of living. Selling expensive, high-quality products will also make innovation more likely.

System Lock-in

The effective use of science and technology is essential to solving the challenges, large and small, scattered throughout Japanese society and creating a sustainable, livable environment. No one disagrees with this view. However, no one believes that science and technology are omnipotent and will absolutely bring happiness to humanity. In fact, I suspect the majority of people harbor a vague fear of science and technology. According to "Philosophy: Approaches to Questions" (Keiso Shobo), science and technology were originally thought of as separate entities, but the current state of modern civilization, in which "what is learned inevitably leads to creation," has made them inseparable. In other words, modern people are incapable of stopping at the stage of interpreting and recognizing natural phenomena, and are compelled to create technology based on that interpretation and recognition. A clear example is perhaps nuclear weapons. Science, which was originally far removed from the world of life, now exerts such a tense influence that it threatens the life and death of humanity. This is where the uniqueness of the modern era lies. The Western Middle Ages was an era of religion = truth. Religious events surrounding churches and other institutions were nothing but politics. The modern era is an era of science = truth, and science is nothing but politics. In short, science and technology are given high priority. Meanwhile, just as the disintegration of religion = truth marked the transition from the Middle Ages to a new era, the disintegration of science = truth is likely to continue as we transition from the modern era to a new era. Living in the midst of an age of science and technology, it is difficult for

us to imagine the dismantling of science = truth. However, as we enter a new era, humans will likely seek an appropriate distance from science and technology, just as they sought an appropriate distance from religion as a means to live better lives. Dismantling science = truth does not mean rejecting science. It is a desire to break away from the supremacy of science and technology. By adopting the stance that science is not the only truth, it seeks to multiply truth. The result will be a more diverse world. What will happen if science = truth is dismantled? Humans will likely use only the science and technology necessary to live better lives. Science = truth, in other words, is a pressure for science to monopolize all truth. This is presumably the origin of peer pressure. In a world where science = truth, all scientific achievements must be accepted as the highest value. However, this is not realistic. For many people, nuclear and biological weapons, the fruits of science, are unacceptable. Opinions are divided on brain death and human cloning, and no resolution has been reached. If we deconstruct the idea that science = truth and expand the worldview of multiple truths, it will become clearer what science and technology humans truly need.

"Collapseology" (Pablo Servigne and Raphael Stevens, Soshisha) is a French book that suggests the world is on the verge of collapse. The book touches on system lock-in, which refers to the situation where new technological directions are blocked within an established technological system, resulting in people having to settle for absurdity. For example, the character layout of computer keyboards was developed in the era of old typewriters and is not suited to digital keyboards. As a result, character layouts that are more efficient and allow for faster input have been devised, but they have never become popular, and we continue to use the character layout from the old typewriter era. The book cites many such examples, and argues that the cause is system lock-in.

"Our current technological trajectory is largely determined by the past, and technological innovations are too often merely attempts to solve old problems. This is called 'path-dependent' transition (being limited by past decisions and events, even if past circumstances are no longer relevant), and in many ways it drives us into 'technological dead ends' and locks us into increasingly counterproductive choices."

Energy is a particularly difficult issue. Currently, there is a global movement toward a decarbonized society as a measure against global warming, but changing the type of energy used means abandoning past investments and constructions, with enormous economic and social impacts.

The book further points out that globalization, connectivity, and a homogenized economy

have intensified lock-in and excessively increased the power of existing systems. This is maximizing the complexity of society, and the increasing fragmentation and specialization leads to stronger social and economic control, which is one of the major factors leading to collapse. Few would disagree with the approach of using technology to solve Japan's numerous challenges. While I agree with this trend, we must also recognize that technology brings its own inherent challenges. Without this awareness, we risk finding ourselves in a position where technology has become the root cause of the deterioration of society and people's lives. While various technological innovations are taking place in Japan, their adoption is less prevalent than expected. While we tend to attribute this to problems with social systems or user sensitivity, in fact, there are many cases in which existing technology resists new technology. Even changing the type of energy required to build a system for that change requires existing energy sources. The book describes this absurdity this way: "It's like shooting yourself in the foot. The survival of civilization is completely dependent on the dominant technological system. It's the ultimate lock-in." Our living environment is affected by system lock-in in every aspect, structurally limiting our choices and leaving modern people with surprisingly little freedom as social beings. Yukio Mishima expressed concern about Japan's future, writing that "an inorganic, empty, neutral, neutral-colored, shrewd economic superpower will remain in a corner of the Far East," but this observation applies more to the future of a world deeply immersed in system lock-in than to the future of Japan.

Why is Japan's Digitalization Slow?

I'm currently sipping coffee at a coffee shop near my home. It's a habit I have before going to work, and I visit it almost every day. As I sip my coffee, gazing absentmindedly out the window, one poster always catches my eye. It's a slogan written by some organization, and it's titled "A Society Where No One is Left Behind." Most people would agree with this notion. However, today's highly globalized society is complex and bizarre, and excessive pursuit of a "society where no one is left behind" could weaken our national power, reduce our international competitiveness, and leave us behind in global society. As we all know, the global community is experiencing a wave of vigorous technological innovation.

Several years have passed since the establishment of the Digital Agency. If this advances Japan's digitalization, that's great. However, I have some doubts about whether digitalization will truly advance in Japan, where an excessive sense of equality remains deeply rooted. For example, let's say there's a certain digital system. This is an excellent

system, and if the government were to introduce it, it would contribute to the welfare of many citizens. Let's say the cost of building this system is 100 million yen. Everyone agrees that it's worth introducing, but this is where a strange debate arises.

"Most citizens can use this system without any difficulty, but the 1% of citizens lack literacy and therefore cannot use it. How do we cover this 1%?"

In Japan, the tendency is to customize systems so that the 1% can use them. However, doing so increases the cost of a system that originally cost 100 million yen to 10 billion yen. Customization is extremely costly. Anyone would be hesitant to adopt a system that contributes to the welfare of 99% of citizens, but if it were to cost 10 billion yen to cover the remaining 1%, it would cost 10 billion yen.

Other countries are more straightforward in their approach. "Let's introduce a 100 million yen system and teach the 1% how to use it. If that doesn't work, they'll have to take responsibility for their own actions." However, this is not the case in Japan. "Are we leaving the people behind?" A group of people suddenly appeared, raving about tyranny, discrimination, prejudice, and inequality. The debate shifted to something completely different, mudslinging ensued, and the introduction of the system fizzled out. At least, that's been the case in Japan up until now. Moreover, while this was glorified as "Japanese kindness," "Japanese sensitivity," and "Japanese hospitality," the "lost 30 years" ultimately weakened Japan's national strength. It's safe to say that no country in the global community will lend a helping hand to a Japan weakened by perverse inequality.

"If the My Number system assigns numbers to citizens in a unified manner and the government can collect information, it will lead to strict control over the people. It could even lead to the reinstatement of conscription, something the current government might do."

I once heard a member of parliament say this with a straight face. The "current government" in this context refers to the Abe administration, and the member of parliament in question was from the ruling party, not the opposition. Surprisingly, many politicians hold this view. The My Number system is touted as a social infrastructure that will streamline government administration, increase convenience for citizens, and realize a fair and just society, but there's no guarantee it won't be abused. The Japanese government, especially when it comes to digital technology, tends to take a haphazard approach, so it's impossible to predict what it might do next. The Diet member's concerns are not entirely unreasonable. This is why many citizens are wary of the My Number

system and reluctant to actively use it. No matter how advanced the technology or system implemented in society, it will not function without trust between the government and citizens, or between citizens and society. Systems used by individuals and companies are naturally different in nature from those used by the state. Individuals can use the system they like based on convenience and enjoyment, while companies use systems to increase productivity and profits. However, when it comes to national systems, balancing the preferences and interests of the government and citizens is extremely difficult. Even when we talk about improving people's lives, citizens have a wide range of ideologies and beliefs, so the implications of improving people's lives are endless. Some people find fulfillment in a completely digital lifestyle, while others find fulfillment in a completely analog lifestyle. With the preferences and interests of government and citizens often at odds and trust often faltering, digitizing and operating a national system is more difficult than one might imagine.

Despite this, individuals who skillfully utilize digital technology continue to make their lives more convenient and expand the scope of their activities. Companies that can implement cutting-edge systems are steadily increasing their productivity and profits. Whether or not a country's systems are digitized, there will always be a certain segment of the population that actively utilizes digital technology. This is a freedom for individuals and companies, and no one can stop them. At the same time, there are individuals and companies that do not (or cannot) use digital technology at all. This is also a freedom. However, the result is widening economic disparities and, in some cases, entrenching poverty. If asked whose fault it is, the answer is simply no one's fault. Technology is equally accessible. The decision to use it or not is up to individuals and companies. Those involved must bear responsibility for what they did or didn't use. The key here is the digitalization of society as a whole. If digitalization were to permeate people's lives evenly, the principle of leverage could come into play, potentially preventing the widening of serious disparities and the entrenchment of poverty.

I often see research reports that cite a "shortage of digital talent" as a weakness in Japan. The argument is that the talent supporting technology is running out, which is causing a decline in technological capabilities. While there's no disagreement about the lack of digital talent, is this really a decline in technological capabilities? A closer look reveals the exact opposite.

"The reason that government systems like that are functioning, even if only partially, is because Japanese engineers have the technical skills. Engineers from other countries

would have fled long ago."

One engineer spoke emphatically. Generally, government systems in any country tend to be complex and bizarre. Public-private relationships are inherently different from private-private relationships. Public-private transactions are intended to provide government services and have nothing to do with business. Motivations like profit making or improving productivity are also less likely. Another difference is that everything is governed by laws and regulations. In the private sector, systems can be used at one's own discretion, but in the public sector, legal reform is necessary. Furthermore, as key concerns change over time, laws and regulations are constantly being added and revised to keep up with these trends. System functions must also be modified accordingly. Because countless laws and regulations operate in countries and societies, when a new law is added or changed, it is extremely difficult to reconcile them. Achieving this through a system is practically a miracle.

As is well known, Japan's system is unique in many ways, even from an international perspective, and is more precise and complex than those of other countries. Making this system function requires technical skills comparable to threading a needle. Japanese engineers are the ones who quietly accomplish this task, and few countries possess such skilled engineers.

For example, Japan's My Number system has a bad reputation. Meanwhile, I hear that South Korea's My Number system is functioning relatively smoothly. Why? The South Korean system is simple. Or, to put it nastily, too rough. On the other hand, Japan's systems, while meticulous, are, frankly, unusually difficult and restrictive. Moreover, the fixation on systems that satisfy these restrictions results in systems that are difficult to use. "The efforts I make every day are like trying to straighten a bent nail. Because it's a tiny nail, there's no room for force, and yet it takes a great deal of pressure to straighten a bent nail. To an outsider, it doesn't look flashy at all, but I strained, my face flushed red, as I strained."

This line from Dazai Osamu's novel "The 88th Night" seems to speak for the position of Japanese engineers.

It has been pointed out that Japan's systems are less versatile than those of the West. While this issue has only recently begun to be recognized, practices that are far removed from international standards, such as hanko (seals) and revenue stamps, remain

commonplace. A defining characteristic of Japan is that it dismisses these useless nuisances as simply "culture." These characteristics have both positive and negative aspects, so it would be naive to hastily pass judgment, but it is true that the negative aspects have become more prominent in recent years. In short, inefficiencies have become apparent, creating unnecessary hurdles to the growth of the country and society. From this perspective, too, deregulation should be undertaken.

In conjunction with deregulation, we should also reconsider the nature of "small government." As is well known, Japan has long aspired to a small government, and in fact, has achieved a small government that appears comparable to that of other developed countries. Under the motto of leaving things that can be left to the private sector, the scope of government responsibilities has been reduced and the number of civil servants has been cut. While this is a small government, there are actually some uniquely Japanese aspects not found in other countries. A smaller government and fewer civil servants should balance things out without a reduction in public services, but for some reason, Japan continues to increase the number of small public services. It seems the government is increasing public services haphazardly, without any scrutiny, in response to public demand, to the point that one wonders if it's losing its nerve. But the civil servants doing the actual work must be working extremely hard. The book "Black Kasumigaseki" (by Yasuhiro Senjo, Shincho Shinsho) was a hot topic a while back, and in Kasumigaseki, where black labor practices are rampant, bureaucrats are taking leave and resigning one after another, shaking the very foundations of the organization. Why is this happening? It's because we're implementing a small government based on ideals that are far removed from what we call a small government. Digitalization is key here. Civil servants desperately want to rapidly adopt cutting-edge digital technology to streamline their work. Ideally, they'd want to fully automate their work using AI and other technologies. However, with the current system, it will be difficult to rapidly introduce digital technology. Incorporating new technology into a system that is already incredibly detailed is extremely time-consuming.

One engineer crossed his arms.

"Japan's systems are packed with technological prowess, but perhaps they are evolving in the wrong direction. If things continue this way, there's a risk that, no matter how much technological prowess there is, new technology will no longer be usable."

It is a great waste and a national loss to have skilled engineers doing inefficient, menial tasks. Instead of flourishing as a home run hitter, a strange manager has turned them

into a dead ball batter, leaving them covered in bruises and dejected. It's time to move away from this bleak situation. We must create a society where home run hitters can thrive as home run hitters. This is what reform is all about. I don't think a small government is wrong. I believe it will lead to a diverse, open society that respects individual freedom. However, Japan's current situation has simply shifted from a large vessel to a smaller one, with the contents remaining the same as before. This is why Japan is evolving in the wrong direction. This appears to be one of the reasons why Japan is not utilizing digital technology as effectively as other developed countries.

Japanese systems, especially government systems, have lost their way and fallen into a Galapagos loop, drowning in a customization hell. No other country's systems are as detailed as Japan's. In fact, they can't. Why is Japan the only country that's managed to achieve this? It's because Japanese engineers have the technical prowess. Businesses from other countries would likely give up and run away. This situation isn't widely known, even among government officials, university professors, and other experts. That's why some professors will lash out and say, "My students can do this with just four or five of them. Japanese businesses that can't do that are slacking off." The development of a single application for a demonstration experiment is fundamentally different from the process of implementing that application on a large-scale system. You're trying to implement a single application, A, on a large-scale system. The large-scale system already has countless applications B, C, D, E, and so on running. Let's say a university student who created application A implements it in a large-scale system that's already in use. A works, but problems arise with applications B and C. Therefore, A is modified to prevent problems with applications B and C. However, applications E and G then stop working. They modify application A again to make applications E and G work, but for some reason, applications B, which had been working before, and applications F and H now malfunction. This is where most students scream. Just because a single application developed in the closed environment of a pilot project works well doesn't mean it can be implemented as is in an existing system. This requires meticulous optimization. This is where true technical ability is put to the test.

COVID-19 vaccine reservations were also being accepted online. Elderly acquaintances occasionally asked me for help because they didn't know how to use the internet. So I did, but the process leading up to the reservation was complicated and time-consuming. My friend apologetically said, "I'm getting old, so I don't understand these things," but no, even people who are still working don't really understand them, and frankly, I don't want to use such a cumbersome application. The reason this happens is likely due to

compatibility issues with other applications. Simply put, simplifying vaccine reservations could potentially cause problems with other applications, so to avoid that, this cumbersome, inconvenient system was created. In fact, every IT service the government rolled out to the public during the COVID-19 pandemic has experienced problems. This is likely because, amid the need for a rapid response to the pandemic, new applications were implemented without proper adjustments. Introducing simple, easy-to-use applications leads to system problems, while preventing them results in cumbersome, inconvenient applications. We want to get out of this situation as soon as possible. To achieve this, surely the only way is to completely renew the system from scratch? Just as the government once led the construction of railways and communications infrastructure, it seems the only way is to revamp it into a system that is more sustainable from a planned economic perspective. It would be great if the Digital Agency could do that...

In any case, these points also offer a glimpse into the characteristics of our modern era, where politics and technology are closely intertwined. Institutional reform is essential to advancing the digitalization of government systems, countries, and society. In other words, deregulation and institutional simplification are essential. The current government is small, so simpler systems are needed to accommodate it. Let me use traffic lights as an easy-to-understand example. Japanese traffic lights have three colors: red, green, and yellow. Red means stop, green means proceed, and yellow means caution, but do we really need three colors? Isn't red enough? You must stop at a red light. This is the bare minimum rule. Drivers can decide otherwise. If traffic lights could only be red, we'd need a system one-third the size of the current one, which would be significantly simpler. Traffic costs would be reduced, operation would be more efficient, and cityscapes would be slightly more beautiful.

Clearly state the bare minimum rules, and leave everything else to individual discretion. Simplifying systems with this approach would make it easier to implement the latest technology in society. Ultimately, this would lead to greater efficiency throughout society. People living in unsustainable societies generally have no faith in the future. The declining birthrate can be seen as a reflection of adults who have no hope for the future. Conversely, creating a sustainable society is the best way to combat the declining birthrate. A sustainable society requires sustainable systems. Sustainable systems are fundamentally simple. The key to simple systems is compromise. Focused efforts are required, such as using only red traffic lights instead of three colors. Simpler systems make it easier to incorporate advanced technologies such as digital technology,

improving their sustainability.

Technology does not drive civilization or society. Technology does not transform countries or societies. After all, it is people who drive civilization and society. It is people who transform countries and societies. When people utilize technology, its driving force increases and the pace of change increases. Technology is ultimately a tool, a driver. No matter how excellent technology is, it will be wasted if people do not use it with clear intention. The same is true for social issues. When people have a strong desire to solve problems and put them into action, technology is put to good use and leads to problem-solving. Technology alone cannot automatically solve problems independently of human will or action.

Japan possesses advanced technological capabilities, but it is not good at utilizing them. The UK-based International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) comprehensively evaluated the cyber capabilities of major countries and ranked Japan in the lowest group, the same group as North Korea, Vietnam, and India. This assessment is almost a national humiliation, but it is difficult to argue against. Even if you have technological capabilities, if you cannot use them, you can't help being seen as incompetent.

Why has Japan been unable to utilize its advanced technological capabilities for the development of its country and society? One thing is clear: it is because it lacks a grand vision for the nation. If a grand vision is set and people move toward that vision, technology will naturally be used. If people do not move, technology will not move forward. Take, for example, population decline. The government has set a goal of maintaining a population of 100 million, but how many people believe in and agree with this goal? No matter how you look at it, this is nonsense, and it only calls into question the government's judgment, making the public more anxious. Japan's population will fall below 100 million in 2050. By 2070, the country will enter a period of shrinking reproduction due to a declining birthrate, dropping below 70 million. Demographic statistics are less false than other statistics, and generally turn out to be accurate. Maintaining a population of 100 million is a pipe dream that ignores reality, and it will not motivate people. As a result, technology will not be utilized. It would be much more appealing to Japanese people to present a vision of a country where people can live as prosperous or even more prosperous lives than they do now, even if the population were to be half of its current size. This would surely inspire many Japanese people and lead them to take appropriate action. If this were to happen, Japan's advanced technological

capabilities would be fully utilized. Technology can only function as a driver when it is based on a sound vision that takes reality into account.

Postwar Japan had a grand vision for economic development. Whether or not it was right, many citizens embraced that vision. Technological capabilities also grew in tandem, and it was rapidly implemented in society. I believe this is a symbolic example of how technology can play a driving role when there is a grand vision based on reality. For Japan, a country facing numerous challenges, the widespread adoption of digital and other cutting-edge technologies is crucial. While I don't believe that cutting-edge technologies like AI, IoT, and robotics will fundamentally solve Japan's challenges, I am convinced they will act as a driving force toward resolving them. At the same time, I have a completely contradictory view. I am also deeply wary of technology. While promoting the use of technology and its implementation in society is essential, I believe that excessive reliance on technology or a desire for technological supremacy must be avoided at all costs. A major reason for this is the problem of "system lock-in." Technology enables standardization and automation, and when implemented in society, it allows many things to function more efficiently. While this is certainly a positive thing, it also results in a stronger systematization of society as a whole, and increased pressure for standardization. While it's comfortable for individuals to function well within a highly efficient social system, if they suddenly drop out of the system for some reason, they're suddenly plunged into complete darkness, completely at a loss as to what to do. Dropping out for some reason can happen to anyone. It would be ideal if people could drop out and get back on the system, but a society built on cutting-edge technology is much more bleak and harsh than one might imagine. Sometimes, one hears opinions that technological innovation is widening the gap between rich and poor, entrenching poverty. In a sense, this refers to the difference between those who actively use technology and those who don't.

To put it in extreme terms, if someone who has been enjoying a civilized life within the system were to fall out of the system, they'd suddenly be forced to live like a primitive man. I imagine that a society that relies on cutting-edge technology would experience such severe system lock-in. If we accept and rely on technology carelessly, the people who live there will unknowingly be forced into a uniform way of life. This is the exact opposite of diversification. How can we promote technology while avoiding technological dependency? As we move toward a fully digital society, we need to delve deeper into the relationship and distance between technology and humans.

Goethe's Lament About Public Opinion

"It's astonishing how easily people can be misunderstood in public opinion. It's truly astonishing."

The German literary giant Goethe is said to have lamented this to his friend Eckermann. Goethe, who lived in the 18th and 19th centuries, was also active as a politician, serving as chancellor of the Duchy of Weimar. It's unclear whether his lament was as a politician or an artist, but it seems certain that public opinion was fraying his nerves.

Anyway, I interviewed several doctors in 2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic, to learn about the workings of the medical industry. The medical world is not simple. It's quite a labyrinth.

One of them is an infectious disease expert. I asked him about his impressions of Japan's COVID-19 response. He began by emphasizing, "In any case, it's best to be skeptical of the statements made by doctors appearing in the media."

"Doctors who appear in the media usually only make statements that fit the scripts created by television and newspapers. Many of their statements are untrue," he said. Without a moment's pause, the other doctor added, "And they're not real experts. They often don't understand things well."

He seemed frustrated and despairing at the modern social trend of not properly communicating the facts. Experts considered authorities on infectious diseases in the medical world didn't seem to view COVID-19 as particularly serious. They ranked it on the same level as influenza, or even lower. In fact, when COVID-19 first began to garner attention, various media outlets reported it as a virus on the same level as influenza. Before long, it was being treated like an unprecedented threat. Influenza infects millions of people every year, and causes a considerable number of deaths. It's contradictory to ignore that and focus solely on COVID-19. "The bottom line is that if you respond appropriately, COVID-19 isn't much of a threat. Given the current number of new infections, I think it's a good idea to get the vaccine. However, the most important thing is to maintain an appropriate social distance," the doctor said.

The doctors I spoke with also expressed doubts about the reporting on vaccinations. They said it's wrong to report side effects or people who die after getting vaccinated as if they were scoops.

"Even healthy young people with no underlying health conditions can die after getting vaccinated. One way is death from shock caused by the injection. It's rare, but it does happen. When you hear death from shock, you imagine someone dying immediately, but

sometimes they can die two or three days later."

Side effects also vary from person to person. Neither medicine nor vaccines are perfect. To begin with, there is no such thing as perfection in this world.

In such a situation, the important thing is to save lives that can be saved. Looking at it the other way around, there will inevitably be a certain number of lives that cannot be saved. There is a drug called A. Taking A can save 99% of lives. However, 1% of people may lose their lives due to side effects, and in Japan, the government places excessive emphasis on that 1% and is reluctant to allow the drug to be distributed. As a result, 99% of people who could have been saved will not be saved.

"The fact is, Japanese-made vaccines are of a very high quality and are fully effective with just one dose. Japan also has excellent treatments. If we had used these, we could have saved lives that could have been saved. There was no need to declare a state of emergency in the first place, and the Olympics could have been held with spectators," the doctor said.

"Was it American pressure that made them use Pfizer and Moderna?" I asked. The doctor replied, "That is part of it, but the biggest problem is that the Japanese government is afraid of the risks. They are extremely reluctant to let Japanese-made vaccines and drugs result in deaths. However, most people will be saved by Japanese-made vaccines and drugs. It is a much bigger problem if we focus on a small risk and end up missing lives that could have been saved."

The doctor continued,

"If the media reported things a little more seriously, perhaps this wouldn't happen." Whenever a complicated topic is discussed, the idea that the media is inherently evil always surfaces. This is also a structural problem. The media, lacking specialized knowledge, can only report the statements of doctors who are experts and gauge public reaction. Without specialized knowledge, they cannot judge whether the experts are first-rate or just gibberish. Goethe's lament is still relevant today.

Chapter 5: How to Transform Japan

When top athletes are in their 20s, they can achieve great results as long as they maintain the same physical condition. However, they lose their ability when they reach their 40s. Their previous physical condition is no longer enough. Japan's current situation overlaps with these athletes in their 40s. To continue their athletic careers as they age, athletes must compensate for their declining abilities by changing their conditioning methods, training methods, and upgrading their equipment. In terms of a

nation, this would mean first maintaining national strength by formulating a new national vision, fundamentally revising existing policies, and implementing cutting-edge technology. I believe that it would be appropriate to focus on preventing weakening until 2040, when the population structure approaches an inverted pyramid, and then, once the population structure approaches a towering pyramid, to shift to strengthening and developing national strength.

The worldview I envision is close to that of soft libertarianism. Everyone should be free to act as they please, as long as they do not infringe on the rights or private property of others. At its core, this is tolerance. Of course, there are many hurdles to achieving this. Japan, in particular, faces high hurdles not found in other countries: "conformity pressure" and "superiority mentality." The pressure to conform, that everyone must be the same, is deeply rooted among the public. It's a very strange phenomenon that conformity pressure exists even in a country without a sense of national unity. Because it's pressure, people don't actively act; rather, they reluctantly go along with the flow. I don't really understand where this conformity pressure comes from. I've done some research, but I've yet to come across a compelling theory that really makes sense to me. Superiority mentality is also deeply rooted. The idea that so-called elites should look after the people is a stubbornly persistent thorn in the side of the public. The origins of superiority mentality are fairly easy to understand and can be explained by the historical background unique to a constitutional monarchy. Meanwhile, for those in power, "conformity pressure" and superiority mentality are convenient tools for manipulating the people depending on the time and situation, so they refuse to let go. "...Since yesterday I have been practicing military roll call drills again, practicing things like Charge! Waah! I'm leaving again today. The real roll call is on July 6th."

This is a letter written by Dazai Osamu to Yamagishi Toshi on June 29th, 1942. At the time, the Pacific War was in full swing. "Charge! Waah!" is likely a metaphor for bamboo spear training. In preparation for the decisive battle, training was being carried out all over Japan to stab enemy soldiers with bamboo spears and shoot down bombers. Yamagishi wrote in "Dazai Osamu Memoirs" that "There is something about this postcard from Dazai that makes him seem quite indifferent to the times. It is as if Dazai has completely given up on the times and is adapting to them."

Apparently there was also an episode like this. When Yamagishi said to Dazai, "You know, the Japanese government thinks they can put out incendiary bombs with fire batters," Dazai just nodded and listened, but said nothing. Yamagishi even found Dazai's decisive approach clever. Incidentally, a fire batter is a tool made from rough rope, which is dipped

in a bucket of water and used to put out incendiary bombs. I've heard that the government at the time was tyrannical toward its citizens, but even so, something like a fire batter was extremely childish. Both the government and the people were completely crazy. What on earth happened? According to Yamagishi, "The entire nation at that time certainly believed in kamikaze. It's strange that they literally believed in it to the core. The masses were at the mercy of their rulers, to the very core." In short, it seems the situation can only be described as fanaticism fueled by mob mentality. In "The Mind of the Crowd," French psychologist Gustave Le Bon analyzes the mechanisms of crowd psychology and warns of the dangers of herd conformity and irrational behavior spurred by enthusiasm. However, the Japanese at the time lost all rationality in the frenzy of war. Or rather, they were in a situation where they would be excluded from society if they chose not to lose their rationality. So many people gave up and adapted. The complete rejection of scientific thinking in fanaticism led to the devastating defeat. In other words, giving up and adapting led to the devastating defeat. The government that started the war is to blame, but the people who, out of deference to the government, devoted themselves to training with bamboo spears and fire hammers, knowing it was childish, were not good either.

And now, in the postwar democracy of Japan, the government has placed the highest priority on the will of the people, and it is said that the people have come to place the highest value on freedom, equality, and peace. I used to believe this, but it seems there was an unseen condition behind it. The coronavirus pandemic unexpectedly revealed this condition.

That condition is "only during periods of near-calm stability." In the event of an emergency, the government will rapidly pressure the public. Of course, issuing a state of emergency during the coronavirus pandemic is appropriate in terms of protecting the lives and property of the public, and it is also expedient from the perspective of international cooperation. The government has not yet displayed the same heavy-handed attitude as it did before and during the war, and it has been restrained in its use of power. The public, too, has been largely obedient, perhaps because the circumstances of war and the coronavirus pandemic are different. However, even during the war, the government escalated its control over the public by calling it a state of emergency, a state of emergency, and international cooperation (with Germany and Italy). And the public was convinced. That's why, as Yamagishi points out, "the masses have become so at the mercy of their rulers."

To me, the bamboo spears and fire banners of war and the masks that everyone is frantically fighting over during the coronavirus pandemic seem to share a common root. During the war, women were apparently assaulted by thugs simply for wearing high heels. This was a lynching motivated by righteous indignation that people should not be frivolous during the looming war. Yamagishi, in fact, suffered a similar fate. He had hit it off with a hostess at a cafe (now a cabaret club) and decided to continue drinking at another establishment. While he was waiting for the woman to come out at the back door of the cafe, he was approached by two men and a physical argument ensued. It went something like this: "What are you loitering around?" "I'm not loitering around at all. I'd say you're just loitering." "Don't argue with me. What are you doing?" "I'm waiting for a girl from the cafe. Can't you see that?" "You're stupid. Don't you realize we're under wartime control?" "You're not allowed to wait for a girl? The government is allowing cafes to open." "I'm going to hit you." "You want to hit me? Then go ahead and do it."

It seems there were many such self-righteous warriors back then, but what about now? Masks have become a necessity amid the COVID-19 pandemic. However, I was a mask skeptic and had doubts about their usefulness. I thought the drawbacks outweighed the benefits. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, one day, I was walking down the street without a mask when a masked warrior approached me out of nowhere, shoulders hunched, and demanded that I put one on. It seems that there are always warriors in every era who completely reject flexible scientific thinking and act self-righteously. There's a Japanese expression, "yannuru kana." It's a synonym for "all is lost" (all is lost), roughly meaning "there's nothing we can do anymore." In Japan during the COVID-19 pandemic, this "yannuru kana" sentiment was inexorably widespread. As expected, the entire country was engulfed in a storm of discrimination, prejudice, and exclusion. The COVID-19 pandemic unleashed the exclusivity inherent in Japanese society. Newspapers and television reported rampant discriminatory behavior, including verbal abuse and stone throwing aimed at vehicles with license plates from other prefectures. In essence, outsiders are infected with COVID-19 and are the enemy. It's a typical village-like mentality. What was particularly egregious was the blanket dismissal of residents of Tokyo and other urban areas as toxic. Discrimination breeds discrimination, prejudice breeds prejudice, and exclusion breeds further exclusion. Behind this lies deep-rooted peer pressure. I believe that peer pressure is a fundamental issue facing modern Japan, and a major cause of the mountain of social problems it faces.

"Due to historical circumstances, 'sekentai' (public appearance) has become the cultural backdrop of Japan today. However, due to the breakdown of its traditional foundations,

it has a complex structure and poses various challenges to society and to us as individuals."

This is an excerpt from "Senkentai Nation: Japan" (Kobunsha Shinsho, by Yuichi Inukai). According to the book, Japan has experienced at least two civilizational breaks in its recent history. The first was the Meiji Restoration. Modernization was an inevitable process in order to counter Western powers, but it severely tore at the psychological and social foundations of the Japanese people. This may have had a greater impact than we realize in the process of shaping senkentai (public appearance) in Japanese society. The other was Japan's defeat in the Pacific War. This led to Japan's Americanization as it modernized. While being Japanese does not inherently make one American, post-war Japanese people have continued to be under implicit pressure to behave like Americans.

Looking at it another way, the Japanese have twice denied their own position in the short span of just over a century. The resulting friction has thrown Japanese common sense, or common sense, into disarray. How should Japanese people live in this situation? The book offers hints: "Be aware that the ancient spiritual foundation of Japanese society is crumbling" and "Always question whether there is any meaning in risking your life and your body for public appearances." In short, it means acknowledging that the public appearances and common sense we rely on, or believe we rely on, are nothing more than fiction.

"Is There a Way Out of Capitalism?" (by Daisuke Aratani, Kodansha Gendai Shinsho) argues that the development of all social thought from the 18th to the 21st centuries can be understood through the conflict between two thinkers: John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Locke's keywords are "negative liberty," "equality of opportunity," and "small government." Negative liberty means securing a sphere in which one can act without being coerced or obstructed by others. Rousseau's keywords, on the other hand, are "positive liberty," "equality of outcome," and "big government." Positive liberty means trying to make one's own independent choices as one wishes. In every country, whether democratic or authoritarian, common sense is formed by weaving in the country's culture and traditions around the core values of freedom and equality. However, ideas about freedom and equality are constantly changing. Sometimes they fluctuate in a Lockean way, sometimes in a Rousseauian way. The United States and Britain today are Lockean. China and Russia could be described as Rousseauian. So what about Japan? It's Lockean, though not as much as the United States and Britain. However, some citizens crave Rousseauian elements.

Common sense is formed by weaving in a country's culture and traditions around the core values of freedom and equality, but what we need to focus on in Japan is how its own culture and traditions are woven into common sense. With the traditional foundations crumbling and becoming Americanized, common sense in Japan becomes, in an essential sense, uncharacteristic of the Japanese. To make such common sense accepted, some kind of pressure is needed. Perhaps this pressure manifests itself as unnatural social standards or a pathological pressure to conform. This is why Japanese society is suffocating, and accepting common sense leads to feelings of "submission," "surrender," and "subservience." If we think about it logically, accepting common sense is a natural and comfortable thing for the people of a country, but perhaps Japanese people should stop for a moment, truly consider themselves, and seek out common sense that suits their way of life.

"Individualism and totalitarianism are seen as polar opposites. However, historically and logically, they are in fact closely related."

In his book "The Fiction of Inequality" (Chikuma Shinsho), author Kozakai Toshiaki argues:

"Totalitarianism emerged in the modern era. Without the modern era, when people were liberated from traditional communities—without the existence of so-called "individuals"—totalitarianism would not have been possible. The book explains how this works:

"Totalitarianism was realized when individuals were separated from intermediate organizations like families and villages, isolated and atomized, and then vertically linked to the state."

Totalitarianism is thus created when a central organization called the state is established, communities like churches, unions, and villages are dismantled, individual ties are severed, and power is concentrated in the state. In essence, individualism is the first step toward totalitarianism. Extreme individualism (or even selfishness) can easily morph into extreme totalitarianism. The COVID-19 pandemic has made this pathology starkly apparent to us living today. They call it the "self-restraint police," the "mask police," or the "infected person bashing." In normal times, people ostentatiously display individualism with a "me me" mentality, love to demonstrate individuality, differentiation, and added value, and always strive to do things differently. But the COVID-19 pandemic has suddenly transformed them, with people lining up to follow the lead of masks and self-restraint, and mercilessly beating anyone who even slightly steps out of line. I'm sure I'm not the only one to be astonished at the pretentious social stigma and pathological peer pressure still lingering in Japan. Born in the 1970s, Japan was

one of the world's leading economic powers, firmly established as a developed nation, for as long as I could remember. Even in school, we were taught that postwar Japan had evolved significantly, breaking away from the pro-war, irrational society of the prewar era. In fact, I blindly believed that Japan today was completely different. The COVID-19 pandemic shattered that belief. Whether it's the self-restraint police or the mask police, what they're doing is no different from the wartime militaristic youths or bamboo spear corps—it's completely irrational. Fundamentally, the Japanese people haven't changed at all.

I want to explore the origins of this pretentious social appearance and pathological peer pressure and change it as much as possible. Japan today is no longer an economic superpower, but a country with major challenges. Now that we've become a different kind of country, we need drastic reform. The traditional pretentious social appearance and pathological peer pressure will only serve as a hindrance. Initially, I attributed the pretentious social appearance and pathological peer pressure that permeated Japan to the innate nature of the Japanese people. Japanese people are said to be inherently group-oriented and like to hang out in groups. However, this doesn't explain the intention behind their individualistic behavior in peacetime. My impression is that Japanese people in peacetime are more individualistic, even selfish, than Westerners. As I researched this further, I came to believe that the pretentious social status and pathological pressure that permeate Japan are structural problems. In the process of transitioning from traditional communities to modern society, Japan has isolated and atomized its people in a more drastic way than other countries. Yet, many Japanese have embraced this isolation and atomization, seeing it as the dawn of civilization.

As Saeki Keishi writes in his book "Anti-Happiness Theory" (Shincho Shinsho):

"...Postwar Japanese people have all come to view this 'connectedness' as a nuisance and have striven to abandon it... At least in postwar Japanese society, the first step was to cut ties with 'blood' and 'local ties'... 'Ie' (family) was seen as the very essence of Japan's pre-modern character." Even the nuclear family is now difficult to maintain. For individuals who have the right to freely pursue their own happiness, the home is cramped and offers no peace and security, the book states. "After the war, we actively dismantled that. We argued that dismantling it was democratization, liberalization, and modernization."

Modern Japanese people have willingly dismantled various communities and so-called intermediate organizations, including those based on blood and geographical ties, because they believed this was development. However, as a result, Japanese people have

become like rootless people with no place to turn. This was fine as long as the economy was growing and society was progressing. In fact, it was even better, as people could act freely, using money as a weapon, without feeling any unnecessary ties. However, when the economy declined and society stagnated, people suddenly lost their way and became dependent on a central institution called the state, which no one really trusts. Rootless people fundamentally lack trust and are always suspicious. When suspicious people gather in one place, mutual surveillance intensifies, making them susceptible to extreme totalitarianism. This is perhaps why we see the emergence of militaristic youth, bamboo spear units, self-restraint police, and mask police. Incidentally, "The Fiction of Inequality" points out that the conflict between individualism and totalitarianism is also evident in social Darwinism and eugenics policies. "Pre-modern society, in which each individual had a unique role and was organically integrated into the community, transformed into a group of interchangeable individuals, and individuals began to be viewed as unnecessary and harmful parts. Only then did eugenics and social Darwinism become possible."

Seen this way, the pretentious social status and pathological conformity pressure that permeate Japan are clearly structural problems. If that's the case, then we need to improve this structure. What's important is to curb pretentious social status and pathological conformity pressure and create a structure that isn't swayed by totalitarianism. I believe that such a structure will provide a solid foundation for resolving Japan's challenges.

"Conformity pressure has become apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, since COVID-19 infections would likely not be contained without it, conformity pressure has only intensified," says Professor Hajime Ota of Doshisha University's Faculty of Policy Studies and author of "The True Nature of Conformity Pressure" (PHP Shinsho). This book delves into the true nature of the conformity pressure that pervades Japan. Professor Ohta cites "homogeneity," "closedness," and "lack of differentiation" as the true nature of this pressure. "Homogeneity," "closedness," and "lack of differentiation" are what led Japan to success in industrial society. These are the three elements that have been considered Japan's strengths, so to speak. "Industrial society relied on perfectionism to eliminate mistakes, and the three elements that Japanese people possess functioned well. However, in the information society, innovation is the key to success. In a world where innovation is a success if three out of 1,000 are successful, perfectionism is like oil and water, and the three elements are nothing but weaknesses. From this perspective, we need to make efforts to eliminate the three elements," says

Professor Ohta. So how can we eliminate the three elements? One way is to change the system. "I see homogeneity and closedness as the essence of the problem. Japanese society, regions, schools, and companies are very homogeneous and closed. Before we can use cutting-edge technology to solve social issues, we first need to change the structures of society and regions. For example, regional homogeneity and closedness can also be seen in rural areas in Europe and the United States. In short, homogeneity and closedness are structural problems. What do we do about regional homogeneity and closedness in order to solve regional issues? Opening up to the outside world is important, and urbanization is the key. Urbanization will likely change the homogeneity and closedness that has taken root in regions," says Professor Ota.

Furthermore, there is a very important starting point for changing the system. That is "respect for individual rights."

"The coronavirus pandemic led to the semi-mandatory implementation of masks and vaccinations around the world. However, in Europe and the United States, it has been clearly stated that this is ultimately pressure to give individuals freedom. Japan, on the other hand, applied semi-mandatory pressure without any respect for the individual. This is a crucial difference, and it leads to a weak awareness of human rights. When this is combined with 'homogeneity,' 'closedness,' and 'undifferentiation,' the pressure to conform increases, leading to a totalitarian atmosphere" (Professor Ota).

Japan's homogeneity and closedness are deeply rooted, and it seems that considerable ingenuity will be required to change the system. We have no choice but to start where we can. One way to do this is to differentiate undifferentiation. Simply put, it means clarifying the division of roles between employees at companies and other organizations. This leads to individual rights and individual freedom. "For example, in Japan, it's common to value not only the results of work but also the process. However, if not done properly, this can lead to increased peer pressure. In Japan, the word "process" is often associated with emotion, and people tend to value the fact that everyone is working hard together. This can lead to people pushing each other to the limit, and they may not be able to go home even after their own work is finished, or they may deliberately create a lot of documents to make it appear they're working hard, which actually encourages waste. In short, it's important to look at the process, and results must be evaluated based on the key points. Otherwise, differentiation will not be achieved, and if role assignments are not clear, various pressures will be placed on individuals," says Professor Ota. Homogeneity and closedness may be comfortable in the short term. Conventional wisdom is easy to accept and discord does not arise. However, the situation surrounding Japan is undergoing drastic changes, including a declining birthrate and aging population. It

is obvious that the current social structure will soon become unsustainable. "The key is to change the system. If we change the system, we can change 'homogeneity,' 'closedness,' and 'lack of differentiation,'" emphasizes Professor Ota. "The COVID-19 pandemic has made me realize that Japanese society is actually different from what I thought it was. A common theory about the Japanese is that they lack individuality and are very collectivist, but as a sociologist, I didn't think that was the case. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has made me realize that, indeed, Japanese people lack individuality and are very collectivist." This is what Professor Yuichi Inukai of the Department of Sociology, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Nihon University, and author of "Japan: A Nation of Public Appearance" (Kobunsha Shinsho), says. The book focuses on the "public appearance" that governs the country and unravels its structure. What's particularly interesting is the way the book compares Japan's public appearance to a kind of religion. It's often said that Japanese people have a weak religious view. In surveys, the overwhelming majority of people answered, "I don't believe in any religion." Meanwhile, the majority of Japanese people visit shrines and temples for the first visit of the year during the New Year and graves during the equinox. Strictly speaking, these actions originate from Shinto and Buddhism, but many Japanese don't see them as religious acts, but rather as customs or behaviors that are done with consideration for public appearances. "Christianity and Islam have 'salvation' as their banner, but Shinto has no concept of 'salvation' and everything is personal responsibility. For example, if all employees visit a shrine and work together as one, the company will make a profit. This is considered a blessing. In fact, public appearances are created through this structure of 'uniting hearts,' which is why they become like religions. Public appearances can be said to be a religion without salvation," says Professor Inukai.

Public appearances and peer pressure are not all bad. Japan suffered relatively little damage during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is because everyone uniformly refrained from going out. While public appearances and peer pressure were certainly behind everyone's uniform self-restraint, it is commendable that the damage was relatively minor as a result. However, Japanese society has become more suffocating than ever before. Public appearances are created through the interactions between people. However, if this becomes stronger, it can become a "spell" for the people who created them.

Professor Inukai points out that "one major factor in the strengthening of public appearances is Japanese society's transformation from a flow society to a stock society." This is because public opinion changes depending on how individuals perceive and respond to it. Public opinion in the second half of the 20th century, when society was on

a growth trajectory and rapidly developing, is naturally different from public opinion today, which has matured and passed its prime.

"The most notable thing is the disappearance of the desire for elite culture. Japanese people today no longer try to show off or reach beyond their limits. There is an atmosphere of aversion to flashiness and a shunning of elites. It seems that people are shrinking and are willingly becoming smaller" (Professor Inukai).

In this kind of atmosphere, the pressure to maintain public opinion grows stronger as people spy on each other. Social media behavior is perhaps a symbol of this. People wield narrow-minded public opinion and undermine each other. How can we overcome this situation? In a society where public opinion and peer pressure have become like religions, it is not easy to break it down and change it.

Professor Inukai says, "It is important to ask whether public opinion is worth risking your life and your body for."

I myself have had many thoughts during the COVID-19 pandemic. The atmosphere of society and people's behavior have transformed in a flash, making it seem as if all previous values have become worthless. It was as if I was crystal clear on the fact that there are no universal values in this world, that the world is baseless. Perhaps I have no choice but to live by this perception.

In "The Myth of Inequality," it says: "Every era and society has its own values that are believed to be correct. However, as time passes and society changes, the nature of what is correct also changes. Therefore, they are not universal values that transcend time and culture. Universality is incompatible with change."

This may be true. "The content of this movie would not be tolerated today," or "If I wrote a novel like this today, I would be criticized by society." Conversations like this often ensue when discussing movies and novels from the past. Values that were once acceptable are no longer valid. This is proof that values are changing. And they are changing faster than we can imagine. And values continue to change without pause. The absence of universal values means that noble values like freedom, justice, and fairness are not absolute truths. There is no ideal to reach, and no eternally correct path. Perhaps this is the true nature of human society. The book also states, "The very belief in the existence of universal truths and a right way of life is problematic. People attempt theories of justice and social contracts to establish fair rules that permeate time and space. However, this is not only a futile effort; it is a dangerous attempt that leads to totalitarianism."

Why are appearances and pressure to conform so intense in Japan? Perhaps it's because

Japanese people have a stronger belief in the existence of universal truths and a right way of life than people of other countries. What is this belief, and where does it come from? Such beliefs generally stem from religion or ideology. However, Japanese people are said to have little religious faith, and there aren't many ideologists. Some point to the Japanese people's strong sense of national unity. Others point to an emperor-centered worldview. However, from a realistic perspective, I believe that this is also a long way off. If I had to say, it's not a matter of beliefs, but rather a strong trigger, such as a crisis, that causes a backlash from individualism to totalitarianism. That's why, during the COVID-19 pandemic, strange social norms and pressure to conform have become rampant and have become all one color.

Excessive individualism can be described as either selfishness or isolation; it's no longer a principle, but merely a state of affairs. Somewhere along the path to modernization, the Japanese may have misunderstood individualism and become lost in a dead end of selfishness and isolation. Individualism breeds totalitarianism, but it's not difficult to imagine that totalitarianism born of selfishness and isolation is far more shocking than regular totalitarianism. This gives us a glimpse into why prewar and wartime Japan was so intense. Paradoxically, breaking away from excessive individualism (or rather, selfishness and isolation) will curb social norms and pressure to conform. The first step in saving the Japanese people from selfishness and isolation is to create communities (intermediate organizations). If we can create relaxed, casual communities, we can move away from excessive individualism, curb social norms and pressure to conform, and avoid the descent into extreme totalitarianism.

The diversification of values within a society means, in the extreme, that the society as a whole will no longer be able to move in a single direction. This cycle of one side standing and the other side standing back will continue, and decisions will never be made. In other words, the diversification of values means that people have less common sense. If this is the case, then social rules should be kept to a bare minimum, and the rest should be left to the free discretion of individuals. It would be more natural to view the differences that arise as a kind of individuality, rather than inequality. Freedom and responsibility are ultimately a pair; the greater the freedom, the greater the responsibility. I interpret neoliberalism as having developed based on this concept. In that sense, I don't think neoliberalism is wrong. Rather, I see it as a humane and natural way of thinking, and I expect it to continue to develop, albeit with twists and turns.

However, greater imbalances have arisen than initially anticipated, particularly in the

economic sphere. Still, I believe that leaving things to the free discretion of individuals is the right approach, and I cannot bring myself to reject neoliberalism. That said, I do believe that modifications are necessary to mitigate its side effects. To modify neoliberalism, it would be better to have another major principle and run society on two axes. In Japan, that other principle is called "Harmony is the Most Valuable."

By effectively linking neoliberalism with Japan's fundamental spirit of "Harmony is the Most Valuable," we may be able to create a society that expands individual freedom and diversity while avoiding excessive imbalance. My ideal is a society in which overall harmony is maintained even when individuals are free to live as they please. Such a society would allow people to live as they please, which would lead to diversity and ultimately well-being and quality of life.

When people are able to be themselves and live as they wish, diversity will spread, and that diversity will break down stereotypes, dispel conventional wisdom, and eliminate absurd concerns about public opinion. People would be able to live much more vibrantly than they do now. The more vibrant people there are, the more the economy will thrive. It's not that people become vibrant because the economy is vibrant; it's that vibrant people that thrive. Diversity can also be seen as a world full of exceptions. How can we create a sustainable, livable society in a world full of exceptions? There is no clear answer, but we can sense a vague direction. If everyone contains exceptional elements to a greater or lesser extent, then we can build a society that assumes exceptions. Tolerance is the key to building a society that accepts exceptions. In Japan's case, it would be best to build society on the spiritual foundation of "harmony is the most important thing." Based on tolerance, we should decide only the minimum rules necessary for human life, and leave the rest to individual discretion. We should accept the rest with a certain degree of resignation, thinking, "The world will be as it will be." In other words, it is the rule of heaven and selflessness. Do your best with your own honest thoughts, and then live your life without being caught up in your own small self, entrusting yourself to the heavens, earth, and nature. The state of mind that Natsume Soseki reached in his later years was "Sokuten Kisshi," and it is a wise saying.

Chapter 6: Rewriting Conventional Wisdom

According to "Philosophy: An Approach to Questions" (edited by Masahiko Kamikawa, Keiso Shobo), "art" is positioned in the overall structural diagram of the lifeworld as a powerful endeavor that shatters common sense and offers a powerful rejection of secular culture. This is why "art" is at the opposite end of the spectrum from "common sense" in

this diagram. Meanwhile, in Japan, the term "art of living" (the art of life) is well established, and life and art are perceived as closely intertwined. However, in the West, where the concept of art originated, the two are clearly distinguished, and a rejection of life has been seen as opening up the world of art. However, even in the West, the distinction between life and art has become much weaker. Upon closer consideration, Japanese arts such as the tea ceremony, flower arranging, calligraphy, Noh theater, and haiku were originally merely recreational pursuits within daily life. That's why they are called the arts of living. Meanwhile, it was Rikyu, Zeami, and Basho who elevated these to the realm of art, pioneering a sublime realm by blatantly rejecting the mundane aspects of everyday life. Judging from their attitude, even the arts of everyday life, at their stage of development, offer a strong rejection of secular culture.

Art is "a powerful act that shatters common sense." So what is art in the modern era? Music, literature, theater, film, sculpture, painting? To me, all of these seem secularized and do not represent powerful acts that shatter common sense. Does this mean that there is no art in the modern era? Perhaps. However, when considering "powerful acts that shatter common sense," ICT and digital technology come into view. In particular, virtual space, which has developed rapidly in recent years, can be a powerful act that shatters common sense. ICT and digital technology are tools, not art. Nevertheless, they certainly harbor powerful acts that shatter common sense, and in that sense they are artistic. The concepts of art and technology are intertwined, but perhaps this is where the complexity of the modern era lies, one that cannot be explained in terms of its connection to the past.

But why is powerful acts that shatter common sense necessary? Philosophers recognize this because it leads to radical skepticism. Descartes' "I think, therefore I am" and Pascal's "Man is a thinking reed" are emblematic of this, but humans grow as human beings by thinking with radical skepticism. Questioning and shattering existing common sense broadens our horizons as human beings. From this perspective, what is needed in today's suffocating era is a powerful attempt to shatter common sense. The reason so much attention is being paid to ICT and digital technology is likely due to the expectation that it has the power to shatter common sense. For example, acting with a sense of reality in a virtual space is a kind of avatar, broadening our horizons as humans and offering the potential to shatter conventional wisdom.

Spanish philosopher Ortega defines the "masses" as "a rootless mob that only asserts its rights but does not fulfill its obligations, and who not only do not question their similarity

to others but are happy about it." When we think of the "masses," we tend to imagine all those without power. However, according to Ortega, not everyone walking around town, regardless of whether they have power or not, is part of the masses. To put it ironically, the image of rootless people who only assert their rights and not fulfill their obligations, and who not only question but even welcome the idea of being the same as others, seems to suggest the image of modern Japanese people. Populism and mob rule have become social themes in recent years, but perhaps the reason these themes are even being discussed is because we ourselves have become rootless people who only assert our rights and not fulfill our obligations, and who not only question but even welcome the idea of being the same as others.

If art is a powerful endeavor that shatters common sense and offers a powerful rejection of secular culture, then artistic activity must shatter and offer a powerful rejection of the rootless people who only assert their rights and not fulfill their obligations, and who not only question but even welcome the idea of being the same as others. It's easy to say, but what exactly should we do? In the world of politics, people are always eager to hear things like "increasing distribution" and "raising wages." They only tout the rights of citizens while hiding their duties in their own pockets. This is typical populism, but it gives them an advantage in election campaigns, so they have no choice. Why do they push rights to the forefront? Perhaps it's because they believe that this is the path to happiness, and the only path. Similarly, the reason we feel comfortable being the same as others is because we believe that this is the place of happiness, and the only place of happiness.

It is this assumption that art must shatter and strongly reject. It shows that forcing rights on people or clinging to the sameness of others is not the only path to happiness. This is the mission of art in the modern era. In other words, it is to continue to express that in this world, there are countless paths to happiness that lie beyond rights and homogeneity. This leads to powerful actions that shatter common sense and a strong rejection of secular culture.

We often hear the word "well-being" these days. It means a good state of being as a human being, but the reason this keyword comes up is because the current state of being is not good for humanity. Philosophy teaches that shattering common sense and a strong rejection of secular culture is because it leads to a path of radical skepticism. The reason the path of skepticism is important is because it broadens one's horizons and motivates one to achieve a better state than the present. In order to fulfill one's well-being, one must shatter common sense and a strong rejection of secular culture. Looking back, this

is how humanity has always developed.

Powerful actions that shatter common sense are the essence of artistic activity. Actions that shatter common sense should ultimately be for the purpose of broadening one's horizons and enhancing human potential. Unconventional behavior or eccentric acts may shock those around them, but they do not broaden one's horizons or enhance human potential. Drawing the line between artistic activity and unconventional behavior is surprisingly difficult. In today's world, where diverse values coexist, intense actions that shatter common sense and eccentric, unconventional behavior appear similar on the surface. I once saw a man board a train half-naked in the middle of the day and openly down a can of beer. To me, he seemed like an eccentric and unconventional man, narrowing the boundaries of humanity and shrinking our potential. However, in an age of diversifying values, it is not uncommon for some to see in this man's actions the breadth and potential of a human being and feel a sense of admiration. When this happens, it becomes difficult to understand what is going on, and the end result is chaos.

In "Bad Boy and Christ," Sakaguchi Ango repeatedly emphasizes that "excellent literature cannot be written without common sense itself." Literature is certainly at the forefront of efforts to shatter common sense, but if one says one wants to shatter common sense, and does not know what common sense one is trying to shatter, or what it is like, one will only end up firing bullets that miss the mark, and ultimately devolve into unconventional or eccentric behavior. Perhaps the reason why literature, philosophy, and art in general have rapidly lost their appeal in recent years and are being treated as eccentrics is because they are trying to shatter common sense without knowing what it is.

"Bad Boys and Christ" concludes:

"Learning is the discovery of limits. I fight for them."

Knowing common sense, or in other words, studying common sense, leads to discovering its limits. I understand that common sense is something that expands and contracts freely according to the circumstances of the times. So-called "turbulent times" essentially mean that common sense is expanding and contracting more actively. This is my personal opinion, but in Japan, if we remain silent, common sense tends to shrink without us even realizing it. This puts a strain on people in the form of strange pressure to conform and social status. Japan is facing a mountain of problems. I don't disagree with that, but viewing things through a narrow, contracted common sense makes them difficult to solve, or makes things that aren't problems appear as problems. Knowing the limits of common sense is important from the perspective of identifying the real problems that truly need

to be solved. If we can discover the limits of common sense, we will know what parts of current common sense we should shatter and how, and we will also know which common sense must never be broken and which common sense we should defend at all costs.

But what exactly is common sense? While it is clear that common sense is an essential function for humans to live social lives, what are the components that make up common sense, and how does it work? Common sense, translated as "common sense" in English, suggests that it originates from a shared sense among people. Every human being is born into a lifeworld and grows through various interactions. In essence, we grow through the construction process of experience. The experience of common sense is what is noteworthy within this construction process. "Philosophy: An Approach to Questions" argues that we should pay attention to the dual nature of common sense. That is, common sense as "knowledge" and common sense as "sensation." For example, etiquette and discipline are the first steps humans learn as common sense, but once these become habits, they become self-evident, natural actions. In this sense, knowledge is elevated to sensation. Most Japanese people take off their shoes when entering a house and use chopsticks when eating. These are common sense that no one questions. The etiquette and discipline we learned as knowledge as children have solidified as natural, self-evident knowledge, and we do not question them as common sense. The book states that this self-evident belief is "nothing more than the result of a conditioned reflex imprinting, so to speak, of the existing society's allocation of value choices based on value standards such as 'good', 'bad', 'don't do', and 'do'."

Meanwhile, while common sense may appear to be a solid foundation for society, it is subject to adjustment according to various circumstances. Common sense only applies in closed societies. Indeed, common sense arose and is self-sufficient in order to maintain closed societies. It is well known that taking off your shoes at the entrance when entering a house or using chopsticks while eating is not common sense in other countries, but rather a kind of exoticism. When a closed society opens up, common sense, supported by knowledge and intuition, is greatly shaken. This is because "value conflicts" and "value reversals" arise. However, dramatic adjustments due to value conflicts and value reversals allow common sense to evolve into a richer, more integrated form.

Rich common sense enriches the people living in our lifeworld. It also makes it easier to pursue individual quality of life and well-being. Why is such a bold move to shatter common sense necessary? It's because common sense, born of a self-sufficient nature designed to maintain a closed society, is inherently self-sufficient. Common sense, comprised of "knowledge" and "sensation," is supported by our innate human nature, but inevitably takes on a narrow and homogenous nature. This leads, as a kind of side effect,

to inertia, formalization, and formulaicization, meaninglessly diminishing human potential. Moreover, common sense is ultimately a measure of the values of established society, and must be adjusted as that society changes. Nowadays, most Japanese people go out in Western clothing, rarely wearing kimonos except under special circumstances. No Japanese person laments this. It's proof that common sense is being adjusted.

Common sense may appear strong, but in reality it's as intangible and flexible as an amoeba. At a time like today, when established society is undergoing major change, the inertia, formalization, and formulaicization of common sense only serve as a burden. This is why a bold move to shatter common sense is necessary. In an era calling for transformation and change, pursuing quality of life and well-being requires an adjustment of common sense.

Art must be a bold, conventional-minded endeavor, but creativity is essential to its practice. No matter how boldly one asserts that it is art, it is not an endeavor without form. In other words, any art, whether it be literature, music, theater, sculpture, or painting, requires a work of art in its natural form. Art begins with the creation of a single work in the lifeworld, but as long as it operates within the lifeworld, it is inevitably subject to pressure from other components of the lifeworld. One particularly significant factor is the economy. No matter how radically an artist's work may be, shattering conventional wisdom and transcending the lifeworld, as long as they exist within it, they cannot survive on a diet of miscellaneous materials. As a practical matter, they must earn a living, and selling their work is a means to that end. In short, the work must be turned into a commodity. And once it becomes a commodity, its use value and consumer value become important considerations. No matter how radical and conventional-minded an endeavor, if it does not meet consumer desires, it will not sell. Generally, if something doesn't sell, you can't eat, and no matter how noble an endeavor, it's difficult to sustain. However, "Philosophy: An Approach to Questions" argues that this harsh reality does not diminish literature or art.

"No matter how high the artistic value, there are economic constraints that force it to be treated as a commodity in one aspect of reality, and we must note that these constraints exist as fundamental constraints on human life." In short, basic economic constraints have, and will continue to, govern society as a whole. Art, faced with these constraints and pressures, is destined to pursue its original purpose of breaking common sense. Knowing this background makes it easy to understand why so much art has become secularized. It is overwhelmed by economic constraints that have become too powerful.

While artistic value and economic value are logically unrelated, the tremendous expansion of economic value in modern times has made it more important for artists to make money than to break common sense. This is not limited to art. Whether it's religion, society, culture, or science, each has its own inherent value, but it is overwhelmed by inflated economic value. In short, the world of life is out of balance. The intense activities of art that shatter common sense can be seen as useless from the perspective of economic rationality. There are also cases where repeating homogeneous activities within closed common sense is in line with economic rationality. This has been the case, at least in industrial society, and Japan was a great success story by promoting standardization. However, the problem for modern Japan is that standardized activities have only inflated economic value. Global trends are changing, but standardization has prevented Japan from keeping up with them.

The Modern Era is Coming to an End

Historical measures often include the "primitive" era, followed by the "ancient," "medieval," and "early modern" periods, followed by the "modern" period from the Meiji era onward, and the "contemporary" period from the postwar period to the present. In Japan, the 500 years from around 700 to 1200 are called ancient. The medieval period spanned 400 years, up until around 1600, before the founding of the Edo Shogunate. The early modern period spanned approximately 270 years, up until around 1870, when the Meiji Restoration took place. The modern period spanned 70-80 years, up until the end of World War II, and the period since then has been the modern period, which has continued for just under 80 years. While definitions vary by academic theory and are not necessarily accurate, Japanese history has progressed roughly along these lines. What is clear is that the "modern" era will also eventually come to an end. While it is impossible to predict when that will be, we all intuitively understand that it is coming to an end. The modern era will sooner or later come to an end. We are standing on the threshold of the next era. A change in era means the replacement of the old order with a new one. The current confusion is perhaps akin to the pollution caused by the clash of the old and new orders. Whoever overcomes this confusion and establishes a new order will become the next champion. The conflict between the United States and China is intensifying. Russia's outrageous actions are a challenge to democracy and a desperate gamble. Why are China and Russia so eager? The answer is simple: They know that whoever establishes a new order will become the next champion. For the Japanese, who enjoy a democratic society, authoritarianism is unthinkable. However, as times and order change, values we have believed in without question—justice, virtue, freedom, equality—can

easily be overturned. The great transformation Japan experienced from prewar to postwar speaks volumes. Human values have no basis, and universal values are nothing more than a delusion. Morality is also a fiction. They are all merely a means of survival. Modern and contemporary history has functioned because we were able to implement systems in society that allowed people to believe in and practice these delusions and fictions. Democracy was one such system. However, metal fatigue has exposed the dark side of this system. Many people have come to accept delusions as delusions and fictions as fictions. No one dares to believe in delusions or fictions. Why has the mechanism been exposed? It's because humanity has progressed and become more intelligent and sophisticated. The internet has also accelerated the flow of information. For example, if you study law, you realize how unreliable and careless the legal basis is. If you study religion, you realize how unreliable and careless the religious basis is. You realize that concealing this unreliability and carelessness is the key to maintaining authority. Now, at the crossroads of an era, we, as people living in this era, must chart a course for a new order for the next generation. We must establish a new, unpretentious order that people can believe in. This new order must be different from the brute force order that China and Russia are trying to establish. A brute force order, like the order of Japan's Warring States period, is fundamentally incompatible with a civilized, intelligent society. For Japan, a country facing many challenges at the forefront, establishing a new order will lead to the essential resolution of these issues and serve as the driving force for the country to embark on its journey as a problem-solving leader.

Human Freedom

"The Fate of Liberty" (Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, Hayakawa Publishing) is a book that examines human freedom based on the philosopher Hobbes's 1651 book "Leviathan."

By the way, Leviathan is a sea monster that appears in the Old Testament (Book of Job). It is said to be ferocious, ruthless, and heartless. Hobbes compares Leviathan to the state (commonwealth) to develop an ideal form of politics. In "The Fate of Liberty," Leviathan is classified into three types: The book describes these three types of Leviathan: "tyrannical Leviathan," "absent Leviathan," and "fettered Leviathan." When the power of the state is too strong, Leviathan becomes violent and the people who live there are forced to oppress it. This is tyrannical Leviathan. On the other hand, when the power of society is too strong, Leviathan disappears, and people are forced into anarchy, living in a lawless, dog-eat-dog world, constantly fighting for their lives. This is absent Leviathan. The book argues that only an environment in which a tamed Leviathan lives can secure

people's rights and enable them to live freely within a certain set of rules. The fettered Leviathan refers to a state in which the power of the state and society is balanced, and this environment is maintained by mutual checks and balances. The fettered Leviathan does not arise naturally, and maintaining it is not easy. The book refers to it as a "narrow corridor." Human freedom can only flourish in narrow corridors. Developing freedom is such a rare and difficult task. So, where is Japan today? Is it "tyrannical Leviathan," "absentee Leviathan," or "shackled Leviathan"? I'm sure many Japanese would say "shackled Leviathan." I agree. However, if we had only weathered the COVID-19 pandemic, it would have been a tyrannical Leviathan. While there were unavoidable circumstances, the state had never controlled private rights to this extent since the war. Under the pretext of protecting the lives and property of its citizens, the government rapidly implemented various measures restricting private rights. The people (social forces) complied without any particular objections. While this situation could be portrayed as a virtuous tale of "trust between the state and society," if it escalates, it will no longer be dismissed as such. Those in power always harbor a strong desire for control deep within. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the people followed government instructions with astonishing obedience. While there was a rational justification for this—confronting the virus—it is undeniable that this public obedience delighted the rulers' desire for control. Some rulers no doubt developed a deep admiration for the tyrannical Leviathan. We must pay close attention to what these rulers will do next. We must not forget that prewar Japan was a typical tyrannical Leviathan, with the emperor at its center.

Since ancient times, Japan has been a nation based on two axes: the shogunate and the imperial court. While the two axes maintained a balance, from modern times until the end of the war, it remained a single-axis nation. In his book "Why Was Japan the Only Country to Escape the Shackles of China? The Intellectual History of Japan's "De-China" Movement" (PHP Shinsho), critic Ishihira views Japan during this period as a "Japanese version of Sinocentrism." After the war, Japan returned to its dual axis, albeit in a roundabout way, and built peace and prosperity. No matter how much the global landscape changes in the post-COVID era, freedom, peace, and prosperity cannot be achieved unless we remain a "Leviathan of Shackles" living in narrow corridors. To maintain this "Leviathan of Shackles," we must once again strengthen the power of society in the face of the growing power of the state.

Democracy is becoming less important.

Every year, The Economist compiles a global democracy index. Japan ranked 16th in the 2024 ranking. The index categorizes countries into "full democracy," "flawed democracy," "mixed democracy (democracy and authoritarianism)," and "authoritarianism" based on their scores. Japan falls into the "full democracy" category. The problem is that the global average has been stagnating since the survey began. Only 6.6% of the world's people live in "full democracies"—half the 12.5% from 10 years ago. In short, more and more countries are turning their backs on democracy. A report by the Mitsubishi Research Institute points out that growing economic connectivity with authoritarian countries like China, particularly in Central Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, is one factor strengthening the division of the international order. Why has this happened? One reason is that democracy is no longer as appealing as it once was. In his book "The Limits of Freedom" (Chuko Shinsho Lacre), French historical demographer Emmanuel Todd writes, "As globalization weakens the nation-state, people are losing sight of the groups they belong to. Modern people are confused and have lost sight of the human condition." What happens when individuals become isolated and selfish, and society becomes inward-looking? He writes, "Advanced societies now seem to be seeking solutions in their own traditions. The United States and Britain have turned to economic liberalism, which exacerbates inequality, while France has turned to secularism, which rejects Islam. As for Japan, some are concerned about a return to prewar nationalism."

British historian Niall Ferguson focuses on "IT totalitarianism," and worries that the IT totalitarianism built by China could spread around the world. He notes that the United States has lost its appeal compared to the US-Soviet Cold War, while China appears more attractive than the former Soviet Union, and notes, "there is no guarantee that democracy will prevail in the second Cold War." It's true that since the end of the Cold War, developed countries, no longer burdened by communism, have lost their goals and fallen into materialism. As a result, social inequality and stratification have rapidly increased, making society unattractive. As if mocking the erosion of democracy, communism, totalitarianism, and authoritarianism are once again gaining strength. We are surrounded by a dystopia. Now is the time to harness democracy's greatest strength—its ability to self-purify—and renew society. When society is repainted, new ideological pillars will be established. Exploring what ideological pillars will be established will provide clues for understanding the next era.

I believe the next era will move toward a more moderate form of libertarianism. The foundations of libertarianism are liberalism, minimal state, and social tolerance—in other words, autonomy, decentralization, and cooperation. Libertarians place the utmost importance on individual freedom and resist regulation and restriction. They are

tolerant of all aspects of the individual, including religion, communism, abortion, LGBTQ, drugs, prostitution, and gun ownership. They also do not discriminate against national or ethnic groups. They believe that the concepts of nationality and ethnicity are meaningless in the first place. Their belief is that one should be free to do whatever one wants as long as one does not inconvenience, involve, or restrict others. Their basic stance is that what constitutes a nuisance and what constitutes a restriction should be decided between the parties involved, so they loathe condescending, uniform regulations more than anything else.

To put it simply, it is the worldview of John Lennon's song "Imagine." For example, they believe that economic inequality arises because market principles are distorted by strange government regulations designed to protect vested interests. They believe that such disparities would not arise if pure market principles were left to their own devices. Although they are all called libertarians, their views vary considerably. While some "hard libertarians" reject government altogether, others "soft libertarians" recognize a certain role for government in areas such as diplomacy, defense, and public safety. What they share is the belief that the fewer regulations, the better—in other words, the smaller the government. In fact, many libertarians support basic income (a policy in which the government regularly provides a fixed amount of cash to all citizens). Introducing basic income and eliminating welfare and pension systems would result in fewer regulations.

My position is closer to soft libertarianism, and I believe it is best suited to our age of diversity. Government regulations inevitably lump everyone together, failing to satisfy diverse values and ultimately resulting in unfairness. The difference between Japan and the United States in their approach to regulation is often pointed out.

In the United States, regulations state, "You must not do A." This means that you can do anything except A, allowing for a high degree of freedom. In Japan, regulations state, "You can do A and B," which means that nothing except A and B is prohibited. This creates a strong sense of oppression and tends to induce strange pressure to conform. In an era when high-quality products could be mass-produced and sold at a uniform standard, the Japanese model was acceptable. In fact, it would have been better. However, in today's age of diversity, if we insist on only doing A and B, we will be left behind by the rest of the world.

Soft, relaxed libertarianism is consistent with the worldview established by the liberal camp, making it relatively easy to accept, and the lack of unnecessary restrictions may increase sustainability. If we are concerned about economic inequality, it would be worth considering introducing a basic income instead of welfare and pension systems as the minimum role of government. Since all citizens receive the same amount, it is fair in a sense. Whether people use the money to play pachinko or save for retirement is a matter of personal freedom and responsibility. I believe that as a side effect, it would also increase the number of couples getting married and having children. If each citizen were given 50,000 yen per month, that would be 50,000 yen for a single person, 100,000 yen for a couple, and 200,000 yen for a family of four with two children. This would allow families to survive even if the entire family were unemployed. If the root cause of Japan's declining birthrate is the economy, then basic income could be one solution.

The keyword for the coming era is "uncertainty." In his book "Deteriorating Democracy" (PHP Shinsho), former Ministry of Foreign Affairs commentator Miyake Kunihiko lists "momentum," "chance," and "error in judgment," and speculates that in times of high uncertainty, "momentum," "chance," and "error in judgment" will be repeated. He goes on to write, "Japan, based on this premise, will need to develop a new decision-making process that allows for flexible and strategic policy planning in a short period of time that can withstand any change. Unfortunately, we may be entering an era in the world where Japan is least adept."

Flexibility and strategy are key to surviving times of high uncertainty. A uniform, inflexible system will not work. From this perspective, too, a system that emphasizes freedom is needed more than ever before.

Chapter 7: Valuing Harmony

I envision a society in which individuals live as they please, unconstrained by restrictions. While at first glance the society may appear fragmented and lacking in unity, harmony is actually at work beneath its core. I believe this is what Japanese society should be like in the Age of Pure. I envision a society that draws on the best of both worlds and past and present, perhaps referring to the past as a way of learning from the past, or perhaps even learning from the past to create something new. To realize such a society, a subtle mediator is essential. I believe that this role should be played by government and other public institutions, and that they should only be granted the minimum necessary authority. Technology can be used to subtly connect free and diverse individuals with society, or as a device to maintain harmony at the root of a seemingly fragmented and

disjointed society.

I would like to focus on religion (myth) in the "Overall Structural Diagram of the Lifeworld." Religion (myth) is the polar opposite of science (technology).

Science (technology) is a force within time and space, while religion (myth) is a force that transcends time and space. Simply put, while $1 + 1 = 2$, and therefore $2 + 2 = 4$ may work within space-time, it doesn't necessarily work in realms beyond space-time. Sometimes $1 + 1 = 10$, and other times -100 . In other words, the world beyond space-time is a realm where the methodologies of space-time don't apply. It's a sensory, absurd world lacking rationality, but it shouldn't be underestimated. This is because humans are animals controlled by their emotions and unconscious, and we only manage to maintain science with just a few percent of reason and rationality. If humans were purely rational and rational animals, most of the challenges facing modern society would have already been resolved.

Putting that aside, civilizations and cultures have generally been formed with religion at their core. Myth (narrative) has played a major role in this. I believe myth (narrative) is also necessary in building a new nation and society.

The key is how to create a modern story based on the motto, "value harmony."

As is well known, "the greatest value of all is harmony" means that everyone should respect, acknowledge, and cooperate with each other, and this phrase appears in Article 1 of the Seventeen-Article Constitution established by Prince Shotoku. It is a core Japanese ideal that has continued since ancient times. As long as Japan exists as a country, the idea of "the greatest value of all" will surely be at its core.

How can we create a modern story based on "the greatest value of all"? A sentence from Dazai Osamu's work, "Yearbook of Suffering," comes to mind:

"I long for the rise of an entirely new trend of thought. To speak it out requires, above all else, courage. My current state of life is based on the sensibilities of French moralists, with the emperor as the symbol of their Natural, and our lives are a self-sufficient, anarchist-style utopia."

When I read this passage as a student, I had no idea what Dazai was trying to say and immediately put the book down. However, now that I've experienced the same hardships as most people and have a better sense of the good and the bad, I can vaguely discern his intentions. I believe the ideal Dazai portrays is close to soft libertarianism. What I want to point out here is that while Dazai longs for new ideas, he also places the Emperor as an example of Natural. I believe Dazai understands that at the foundation of new ideas

or social change, a common sense that has continued since ancient times is essential, and I hold up the Emperor as that example.

I personally believe that the Emperor should be at the center of a modern story based on the motto "value harmony." However, I would like to emphasize here that I have absolutely no intention of returning to the prewar era, such as creating a centralized state with the Emperor at the apex or making Shinto the central ideology of the state. My ideal is for everyone to respect each other and for individuals to live as they wish. What I am aiming for is a "plain age."

Japan has maintained a balance between the Imperial Court and the Shogunate. This balance was significantly disrupted from the Meiji Restoration until Japan's defeat in the war. Although Japan experienced rapid growth as a modern nation during this period, it was also a period of constant war and oppression, and suffered its deepest wounds in recorded history. Meanwhile, Japan currently maintains a two-axis system, albeit in a twisted form. This system should be maintained. The Emperor is, above all, a figure who prays for the prosperity of the nation, and he should be at the center of the story as a shared feeling among the people. Bringing the Emperor up for discussion as a topic provokes criticism from many quarters. While it is no longer as taboo as it once was, special consideration is still required. I have a few requests for His Majesty the Emperor. First, I would like him to assume overall responsibility for the nation's digitalization efforts. Second, I would like him to leave Tokyo, the political center, and return to Kyoto. This would send a powerful message toward a decentralized, collaborative society and regional revitalization.

National digitalization projects have repeatedly emerged and disappeared, much in line with the "lost 30 years." The Digital Agency launched in September 2021 and has set out a policy to lead the nation's digitalization. However, if things continue as they are, it will simply continue on the same path as before and achieve only small-scale reforms that will have little benefit to the people.

Meanwhile, Japan's situation is worsening by the minute. As of May 2025, Japan's digital deficit is expanding steadily. According to the Ministry of Finance, the digital deficit in 2024 will reach a record high of 6.6507 trillion yen. Advances in AI will further expand the deficit, and if things continue as they are, it will easily exceed 10 trillion yen in a few years. By comparison, the deficit in 2014 was around 2 trillion yen. The rise of cloud computing lies behind the more than threefold increase in the deficit over the past

decade. For example, in Japan, municipalities are promoting digital transformation (DX) centered on the cloud, with a view to revitalizing local communities. The goal is to provide efficient and comprehensive services to residents by digitizing local communities using the cloud. However, in current local areas, the cost burden outweighs the efficiency gains associated with cloud computing and digitalization, and it appears that cloud computing and digitalization are actually contributing to the impoverishment of local communities. If this trend is left unchecked, we risk falling into the irony of seeing regions regress as they are disrupted by digitalization the more they advance DX.

In his book "Techno-Feudalism" (Shueisha), Greek economist and former Minister of Finance Yanis Varoufakis points out that the advent of the cloud has turned countries, companies, and people without cloud capital into serfs in the digital space. His book vividly illustrates how, no matter how hard people work, their lives do not become easier, and the digital deficit only grows. Currently, only the United States and China have true cloud capitalists, and if things continue as they are, Japan will become a digital colony. It cannot be denied that the current wave of AI will accelerate Japan's colonization. Japan has repeatedly "won on technology and lost on systems." In normal business, wins and losses are inevitable, so if we continue to challenge ourselves, we will eventually see the light of day. However, what is currently unfolding in the digital realm is the restructuring of a global ruling class that transcends democracy and capitalism. The fate of Japan, where a digital colony wins on technology but loses on systems, is more tragic than comical. This must be avoided at all costs.

I believe that Japan's digitalization will take decades to complete. Of course, it would be ideal if it could be completed in a few years, but given the current situation, I believe it must be tackled over several decades, or even as a 100-year plan for the nation. Simply importing superior technology from the United States or elsewhere and disseminating it domestically would only take a few years. Repeating this cycle, however, will only deepen digital colonization, preventing Japan from ever escaping colonial rule. Colonies are unable to exercise their independence and are constantly at the mercy of external pressures. As a result, the high-quality, unique traditions and cultures they have built up over a long history are eroded, and they even lose sight of their *raison d'être* as a nation. This is the fate of colonies.

The way to escape digital colonization is to possess technology that we can control ourselves and at the very least position it as the standard within Japan. A quick look at the digital technologies we currently use reveals that computers are Windows or Apple.

Smartphones are Android or iPhone. Public clouds are AWS, Azure, or Google Cloud. Even the open AI technologies that will become widespread in the future, such as OpenAI, are all American technology. To put it bluntly, Japan has become a digital colony of GAFAM, and the Japanese people have unknowingly become GAFAM's serfs. The way to escape this is to have at least one domestically produced technology that can be controlled within Japan, whether it's PC or smartphone operating systems, public clouds, or open AI. With Japan's current technological capabilities, it is possible for us to have domestically developed technology. It will take time and money, so it's not easy, but it's not impossible. If we don't do anything, our technological capabilities will decline and we will slide into a digital colony, helpless and helpless. Technological capabilities that are not used will inevitably decay.

As mentioned above, this is a time-consuming and expensive undertaking, and it won't happen overnight. Taking on the global powerhouses of GAFAM requires a half-hearted approach, and there will be considerable hardships. However, it's not impossible. Furthermore, if we don't do something, Japan will surely become a digital colony. On the other hand, if we put our all into overcoming the pressures of the digital colony, we can envision a new future as an independent nation. It's well worth undertaking as a long-term plan for the nation.

Why has Japan so far excelled in technology but lost in systems? What's clear is the lack of a leader who could take overall responsibility. If the prime minister were truly in charge, digitalization would likely progress reasonably smoothly. However, in Japan, prime ministers' terms are short, making it difficult to settle down and commit to major, decades-long projects. Without the leadership and charisma of the top leader, national digitalization will not be successful. Ad hoc responses under a prime minister who has lost his charisma and is constantly changing could lead to a system that will have a lasting impact and only accelerate Japan's decline. A charismatic leader who can demonstrate long-term presence is needed. In Japan, the only person suitable for this role is His Majesty the Emperor.

Article 3 of the Constitution of Japan: "All acts of the Emperor in matters of state require the advice and approval of, and the Cabinet is responsible for all such acts."

Article 4: "The Emperor shall perform only such acts in matters of state as are provided for in this Constitution, and shall not have powers related to government."

The above provisions prohibit the Emperor from engaging in political activities.

Meanwhile, Article 7 of the Constitution lists the Emperor's acts in matters of state as including constitutional amendments, the promulgation of laws, cabinet orders, and treaties, the convening of the Diet, the dissolution of the House of Representatives, and the certification of general and special amnesties, pardons, commutations, and other exemptions and restorations. The ambiguity of the Japanese Constitution has long been pointed out, but the Emperor's state affairs are particularly vague, making it difficult to draw the line between what constitutes a political act and what does not.

The digitalization of the nation is a project carried out with the aim of increasing the national interest and is therefore of a very public nature. In that sense, it can be considered a political act, but I believe that the Emperor, who exudes enduring charisma, is the perfect person to head this ambitious, long-term project to protect Japan from digital colonization and raise the bar on the lives of the Japanese people as a whole, perhaps even over several decades.

This brings to mind Yukio Mishima's Theory of Cultural Defense. While this theory may seem nationalistic and biased toward traditional culture, Mishima expressed a sense of crisis and concern that "if things continue as they are, 'Japan' will disappear." While Mishima's insights may be met with approval or disapproval, his sense of crisis and concern that Japan will disappear if things continue as they are is likely shared by many people living today. What is noteworthy about the cultural defense theory is that it discusses the significance of the "emperor as a cultural concept."

The aim of increasing the national interest through the digitalization of the nation is to put Japan on a sustainable path as an independent nation. At its core is the preservation of species, the preservation of spirit, and the preservation of history, tradition, culture, and art. In other words, it is an endeavor that goes far beyond the framework of political action. As the symbol of the nation and a living expression of the common sense of the people, I believe it is only appropriate to have the Emperor take on the role of overall leader from the perspective of cultural concepts. We will create a society in which we can pursue innate human happiness, with the basic Japanese way of life of "valuing harmony" at its core. I call this the "age of simplicity."