

EVENT SUMMARY:

Japan: The Basics

Talk by Dr Christopher Hood

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Introduction:

First of all, I would like to thank the Daiwa Anglo-Japanese Foundation for very kindly hosting and inviting me to do this book launch. I would also like to thank Routledge, particularly Stephanie Rogers, for her immense patience during the process of writing this book.

There are a few of you in this room who are from the academic world and know that despite what we tell students about deadlines being absolute, when it comes to book manuscripts, deadlines are rarely deadlines, especially when a pandemic like Covid comes along. So, thank you all for coming.

Today, I am going to talk about a variety of topics by essentially taking you on a journey through the book. While you might still want to purchase your own copy, this talk will serve as a guided tour. I will be showing you photographs, tables, and graphs from the book so you can see them on the big screen in full colour. If you buy the e-book, these images are in colour; however, they are printed in greyscale in the paperback and hardback versions. You will be able to view the colour versions on my website in due course.

The first part of the book consists of the dedication and acknowledgments. There are many people I would like to thank, and I encourage you to take the time to look through the acknowledgments, some of you in this room might even recognise your own names there.

In terms of the dedication, I selected two specific groups. The first is my students, particularly a group of them, some of whom are pictured here, though not all. In fact, one student who isn't in the photo is actually in the room with us today. We called ourselves the "Costa Gang" because during a period of industrial action, we would decamp to a local Costa Coffee to chat about Japan, talk about the book, and discuss updating it from the first edition to the second. Their input was invaluable. Indeed, my interactions with students over the years have been a major driving force behind this book, making it only appropriate to dedicate it partly to them.

The second dedication is to a friend of mine who sadly passed away a few years ago. It is friends like him, the ones you first meet when you begin engaging with Japan, that shape your path. As a 17-year-old, you never

realise how much of an impact they will have on your life. They may not be typical, but they still represent some aspect of Japan and introduce you to new dimensions of the country. We sometimes overlook just how significant our first encounters are, whether with people or books, and this is a point I will return to later.

Establishing the Basics

The book is structured into several chapters, starting with a preface focused on establishing the basics. For my students watching online or sitting in the room, you know I like to use visual media, so we will start with a short video. Why am I showing you this video? There are already many books about Japan. Many are specialised monographs, while others attempt to cover everything about the country.. When Routledge approached me to write a book on Japan, they said, "We want you to write another book covering everything." I wondered: how could I make my book stand out from the competition?

Even though they approached me for both the first and second editions, I still had to fill out the standard author questionnaire. It asks questions like: "Who are your competitors?", "Why is your book different?", and "Why should we publish this?" I found myself thinking, "You asked me to write it, so why am I answering these questions?" This made me reflect on a common issue with academic books: as academics, we naturally tend to focus on providing answers. But what is the actual question? What are the questions we should be arming our students with? By "students," I do not just mean those in universities or schools, but anyone with a desire to learn. What questions should we give people to help them explore a country? In this case, that country is Japan, and I hope this book serves that purpose.

The series itself is called "The Basics," published by Routledge. For almost any subject you want to study, there is likely a "Basics" volume. I like to think of this concept in terms of the Japanese word *kihon*, which means foundation. In English, "basics" can sometimes sound a bit too simplistic, but in Japanese, *kihon* is a fundamental principle; it is the very basis of a practice. We see this clearly in Sumo. As you can probably tell from my stature, I am a big fan of Sumo. In Sumo, *shiko*, the basic leg-stomping exercise, is the foundation of everything. You can watch wrestlers train for hours performing these very basic movements to build muscle memory. It was with that exact principle in mind that I began structuring this book.

However, writing an introductory book comes with a unique responsibility. As I mentioned earlier, the first book we read on a topic often has the most lasting influence on us. For example, when I began my research into the 1985 Japan Airlines crash, the first book I read was by the *Asahi Shimbun*. Because it made sense, I evaluated every subsequent book through that initial lens, asking if it was consistent with what I first read. If I had started with one of the conspiracy theory books instead, who knows where my research would have ended up.

So, being the first point of contact is a significant responsibility. Writing a book titled *Japan: The Basics*, which will naturally be many people's introduction to the country, carries a lot of pressure. It is both unnerving and terrifying, but also incredibly exciting to know that I am helping people embark on their journey of discovery.

I know some academics do not value textbooks as highly as specialised monographs or refereed journal articles. However, I am immensely proud of this book, and particularly of this second edition, even more so than the first. This is largely because of its ability to reach a much broader audience, which, in the end, is what education is all about. As academics, we are privileged to experience and research things that many others cannot, and I believe we have an obligation to share that knowledge. The reality is that through a textbook, I can reach far more people than through specialised research papers. The same is true of classroom teaching; whether directly or indirectly, we have the opportunity to touch many lives. We can also do this through blogs and social media. This desire to connect is what led me to collaborate with my students to ensure this book is as accessible and engaging as possible.

Chapter 1: Studying Japan

When I was first approached by Routledge to do the first edition, they told me that although the book would be titled *Japan: The Basics*, I could focus on whatever I liked, whether that was international relations or another specific field. That open-ended freedom actually does not work well for me. I am the kind of person who, if told, "You are cooking tonight," wants to be shown what is already in the fridge so I can put something together. If someone tells me to go to the supermarket and choose whatever I want, I struggle with making those decisions.

However, whether due to my natural interests, my background, or my teaching experience, everything fell into place. I realised that a great starting point was acknowledging that anyone picking up this book is not starting from zero. Everyone has some prior knowledge of Japan. Today, that baseline is very different from what it was ten or twenty years ago, thanks to the widespread availability of anime and access to Japanese television programs. Far more people have visited Japan now as well. Yet, certain stereotypes and clichés still linger. I thought, "Let's start right there." The goal isn't necessarily to label them as accurate or inaccurate, but rather to use them as a launching pad to explore why some of these perceptions persist over time.

This approach allowed me to bring in some of my broader research interests. A central theme of the book, which is raised through various questions, is examining who is studying Japan, why they are studying it, what they are choosing to focus on, and where they should even begin their learning journey. I don't think we pause to reflect on these questions often enough, which is what I try to encourage here. I view this book as a beginning, not an end. I hope everyone finds it useful, even Japan experts, who will hopefully find value in the integration of my recent research. Above all, I want readers to use it as a springboard to do further reading, visit Japan, and explore more deeply.

When studying Japan, especially when visiting, but also in general, we must learn to use our eyes. One of the first pictures in the book opens up an important discussion on this visual literacy. Many of us in this room were brought up in Europe, where we are accustomed to reading from left to right. In Japan, however, especially historically, information flows from right to left. To view Hokusai's famous print the way he intended, we have to adjust our perspective. In the book, I include both the original and a flipped version of the image. You will likely find that in the flipped version, Mount Fuji suddenly appears slightly larger, even though I haven't

changed the scale at all, I simply mirrored the image. A key discussion in the book revolves around this idea: you sometimes need to unlearn your default habits and be prepared to view things differently.

We also need to be honest about our observations. I was particularly pleased with a photo I took that captures classic Tokyo: Tokyo Tower and modern skyscrapers side-by-side with a traditional temple. We love to get excited about these contrasts, often repeating the cliché that "Japan is a land of contrasts". But the truth is, I can go just two miles from where we are now in London and capture the modern Shard and the historic St. Paul's Cathedral in a single frame. You can find similar juxtapositions all over the world, but when we visit Japan, we actively seek them out. This selective searching is exactly how certain stereotypes and clichés are sustained.

Chapter 2: Symbols, Shibuya & Shinkansen

This brings us to Chapter 2, which focuses on symbols. I have a bit of a love-hate relationship with the title. After finalising it, I realised people might think it was a reference to the singer Prince, it has absolutely nothing to do with him! Instead, it explores the various dimensions of cultural symbols.

One of the main challenges of writing a general introduction to an entire country within a 70,000-word limit is deciding what to include and what to leave out. The news moves fast, and keeping everything up to date is extremely difficult. Some things change rapidly, while others remain constant. While I used a different image than the first edition, I kept the iconic Shibuya Scramble crossing because it is what Western audiences expect. Virtually every North American or European program featuring a scene in Japan will show the Shibuya crossing. Interestingly, when Japanese television programs want to signal that a scene is set in Tokyo, they rarely show the Scramble Crossing; they are much more likely to show Tokyo Tower or, increasingly, the Tokyo Skytree. Yet, the Scramble Crossing remains the dominant image abroad.

Of course, international audiences would also be disappointed if I didn't include an image of the Shinkansen. This has been a central starting point for my research. Having written a book on the Shinkansen and its cultural symbolism, I like to ask: what can we learn about Japan from this train? The Tokaido Shinkansen will be in the news in just under two weeks, as it celebrates its 60th anniversary on October 1st. This high-speed rail line rushes between Tokyo and Osaka, a distance roughly equivalent to London to Edinburgh, in just two hours and 18 minutes.

But the Shinkansen also opens up discussions on wider demographic issues. It highlights depopulation and the emptying of the countryside. While major metropolitan areas continue to expand, smaller cities, which in Japan refers to any municipality under 500,000 people, are collapsing. I don't think many people fully grasp the staggering speed of Japan's population decline. A few years ago, I used to tell my students that the population was shrinking by about 300,000 people per year, the equivalent of wiping a city the size of Cardiff off the map annually. Of course, this decline is spread across the country, not concentrated in one place. But this past year, the population fell by 700,000, which is the equivalent of Glasgow. Within a year or two, the annual loss will equal Birmingham. That is how rapidly it is declining. It is highly likely that within my lifetime, the population of the UK will surpass that of Japan.

The impact of this shift is incredibly visible as you travel around the country today. Ironically, high-speed rail lines that were originally designed to connect and revitalise rural areas are now accelerating the migration of people away from them, emptying out the countryside.

While I won't detail every table in the book, I wanted to highlight this specific graph showing the regional variations in fertility rates across Japan. Having visited all 47 prefectures, I enjoy discussing these regional differences. As academics, we often advise against making generalisations, yet we find ourselves making them constantly because analysing every specific detail would exceed our word count. Nevertheless, these massive regional variations exist and are vital to recognise.

Consider the stark differences in land prices. I have a chart showing residential land prices by prefecture, and those in the back can probably guess which bar represents Tokyo. What interests me most is what this data symbolises. For anyone who has studied market forces, Japan is a fascinating anomaly where traditional economic models seem to break down. If you want to see a country where standard market forces fail to distribute the population, look at Japan. Logically, cheap land prices should attract people to rural prefectures, yet everyone is choosing to move to the crowded cities instead.

This urban crowding results in severe space constraints. Anyone who has lived in or visited Japan knows how cramped living quarters can be. High rental rates and pet restrictions have driven creative cultural solutions, which I illustrate in the book using several photographs that also appeared in the first edition. The photo in the top left features my children. It was taken ten years ago, and they are actually sitting here in the front row today. These images illustrate the real impact of spatial pressure in Japan.

I also include a table comparing costs, though unfortunately, newer comparable data was difficult to source. It addresses a perennial question among journalists and travelers: "Is Japan an expensive country?" If you have visited Japan recently, you will know that, currently, it is incredibly affordable. While airfares remain high, once you land, daily expenses are very reasonable. Of course, this is highly dependent on exchange rates. Over my years of visiting, the pound-to-yen rate has fluctuated wildly between 105 and 295 yen, nearly a threefold difference. However, currency fluctuations don't tell the full story, because lifestyle choices vary so much. This is why I like this table; it highlights that people live differently within their respective countries, meaning simple price comparisons are often misleading.

Chapter 3: Visual Packaging Culture & Content Tourism

Chapter 3 is titled "Visual Packaging Culture," a term I've developed as an evolution of Joy Hendry's seminal work on Japan's "wrapping culture". The concept is best illustrated by a photo that didn't make it into the book. Taken from my own kitchen cupboard, it shows two cans. We naturally recognise what the contents are based on visual symbols. However, looking closely at the can on the left, we realise that even though it features illustrations of carrots, peppers, and cucumbers, its actual main ingredient is coconut milk. Discerning this requires a deeper level of visual literacy. In this chapter, I explore which symbols we understand intuitively, which ones require active learning, which aspects can be easily grasped by outsiders, and which ones take much

longer to decode. While I only introduce this concept in the book, I hope to expand on it in a future monograph.

Everyone will appreciate the next slide. Who doesn't love Hello Kitty? But it raises a funny question: why on earth would you paint a Shinkansen bullet train in a Hello Kitty theme? We usually think of transportation simply as a means of getting from point A to point B, but let's hold that thought.

Another phenomenon tied to travel is "content tourism", where people visit locations featured in their favorite films, novels, or music videos to immerse themselves in that world. I have participated in this myself. I don't expect many of you have seen the 2008 film 'Climber's High'. It is based on a Japanese novel and relates directly to the 1985 Japan Airlines crash, which is how I first encountered it. Content tourism is about visiting these sites to recreate specific shots. On the slide, the two images on the left are stills from the movie, and the two on the right are my own photographs trying to replicate those exact scenes. Sometimes, transport and travel are not just about the final destination. Take these commercial airplanes in Japan, for example. I would almost suggest that the airplane on the top is "cosplaying" as C-3PO from Star Wars.

This brings us back to my earlier question: "Why would you put Hello Kitty on a bullet train?" In my view, that is the wrong question. The real question is: "Why wouldn't you?" The extra cost is minimal. While there are branding licensing fees to pay to companies like Sanrio or Disney, the actual paint costs the same. Why not bring some joy and playfulness to everyday life? In a country famous for its mascot culture, it makes perfect sense. Sometimes we need to flip our questions on their head.

Chapter 4: Nature

Chapter 4 covers 'Nature'. We often hear about how much Japanese people appreciate nature, but the chapter also looks at the darker side: environmental degradation and the destructive impact of nature on Japan, such as earthquakes and typhoons.

The chapter covers several related topics, including Japan's ever-growing list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites. It was also the perfect excuse to include one of my favorite photos. During the preparation for the first edition, I spent two or three days debating which picture to use for this section. I had visited this location twice. On my second visit, the place was packed with tourists, both domestic and international, all taking photos.

I had to ask myself: do I want a clean photo of these Japanese macaques (snow monkeys) relaxing in a hot spring, which, by the way, is a man-made concrete pool, or do I want a photo that includes the crowd of onlookers? In the first edition, I chose the clean shot. This time, I went with the wider view to show the tourists in the background.

Listening to the tourists' conversations was fascinating because everyone was doing the same thing. They watched the older macaques dip a tentative toe into the water, and everyone would go, "Look at how human they are!" Once, I saw a group of older monkeys sitting calmly when a young one ran up, jumped into the air,

and did a cannonball right into the center of the pool, splashing everyone. The reaction of the older monkeys around the edge was hilarious, it looked exactly like exasperated parents. And yet, while tourists find these similarities with macaques heartwarming, those same tourists might go down to Tokyo Station two hours later and exclaim, "The Japanese are so different from us!" It makes you wonder: what is really going on there?

Chapter 5: Beliefs & Practices

This brings us to Chapter 5: 'Beliefs and Practices'. Over twenty years ago, during my job interview at Cardiff University, I told a future colleague that there were two subjects I would never, under any circumstances, research in relation to Japan: literature and religion. Seven years later, guess what I was researching? Literature and religion. As I mentioned, my research into the JAL crash led me directly to the novel *Climber's High*. Religion entered my work through the study of memorialisation, so I have ended up doing both.

When discussing religion in Japan, and I say this with a polite nod to the Japanese members of our audience, people often claim, "We are not religious." Yet, come January, you see massive queues of people visiting shrines and temples. It raises the questions: What do we actually mean by "religion" in a Japanese context, and how do these practices play out? The book addresses these questions and explores the memorialisation surrounding the 1985 JAL crash, which in turn opens up a discussion on a very different topic.

While JAL crash victims are memorialised in deeply structured ways, a place like Aokigahara (the so-called "suicide forest") represents the opposite. To be honest, I would prefer not to discuss Aokigahara in this book. I only included it because of the intense fascination it holds for Western media. However, both the domestic and international coverage of this forest misses the real issue. A key part of the tragedy of Aokigahara is that those who take their lives there often cannot be properly memorialised because it is impossible to determine exactly when they died, a stark and painful contrast to the JAL crash site.

The broader and more critical issue we are missing is a serious dialogue on suicide and mental health in Japan. This debate is largely absent even from domestic media. When Japanese news outlets do cover the topic, they focus heavily on the absolute headline numbers. But because the overall population is declining, we should naturally expect the absolute numbers to drop. If you look at the actual rate per capita, however, it is not falling nearly as quickly as it should. This is a crucial area that demands open discussion.

Discussing suicide in Japan historically connects to the concepts of *kamikaze* and *sakura*. This brings me to a brief story about the first edition. Anyone who has visited Japan in the spring knows that authentic cherry blossoms are actually very pale, almost white. When I suggested putting a photo of sakura on the cover of the first edition, the publisher objected, saying the image was too white and would get dirty too easily.. Ironically, the design they proposed had a massive white circle right in the middle! We had a bit of a back-and-forth. I sent them various images, and they kept rejecting them as "too white." In desperation, I loaded an image into Photoshop, artificially bumped up the pink saturation, and sent it over. They replied, "Perfect!" And that is how the cover of the first edition came to feature a vibrant "Japanese" cherry blossom, taken from a tree just twenty meters from my house in Cardiff. We see what we want to see, and we believe what we want to believe.

Also in this chapter, I discuss Japan's famed service industry, examining concepts like *omotenashi* (hospitality), and whether this intense service level leads to material waste, which ties back to environmental concerns.

Chapter 6: Loyalty & Accessibility

Chapter 6 is the only chapter that shares its title with the first edition. It has absolutely no connection to the Three Musketeers, though if you're curious about the naming, you can ask me during the Q&A !

This chapter covers traditional belief systems, social structures, and concepts of loyalty. When we talk about loyalty, the conversation naturally leads to Hachiko, the famous faithful dog. I actually considered omitting Hachiko from the second edition, but some very vocal students wrote all over my copy of the draft, demanding, "You must keep Hachiko, sir!" So, Hachiko remains, which also allowed me to include a fascinating photo of the Shibuya crossing completely empty of people in the background.

This chapter also addresses accessibility and support for individuals with disabilities. I want to extend a special thanks to Maud Rowell, who helped me understand the unique challenges faced by visually impaired individuals in Japan and elsewhere. As I have written on my blog, not enough of us talk about accessibility. We shouldn't leave it entirely to disabled communities to advocate for themselves; it is a responsibility for all of us.

While Japan outperforms the UK in several areas of accessibility, my travels show that the implementation is highly inconsistent. It is this patchiness that creates the biggest barriers. For instance, a visually impaired pedestrian has no way of knowing if an unfamiliar crossing has an audible signal. However, on the bright side, when you press a pedestrian crossing button in Japan, you don't have to worry about touching discarded chewing gum as you so often do in the UK.

Chapter 7: Nationalism & Symbols

This brings us to Chapter 7, which addresses nationalism and internationalism. At some level, I wish I didn't have to write this chapter, but I am naturally drawn to these topics. It links directly to my PhD research, during which I interviewed figures like former Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone and former Tokyo Governor Shintaro Ishihara.

Given the Western media's preoccupation with Japanese politics, these discussions are essential. Currently, there is an LDP leadership race underway, and the media will undoubtedly use labels like "nationalist" or, as they frequently did with the late Shinzo Abe, "ultra-nationalist." But what do these terms actually mean in a Japanese context, and do they align with how we define nationalism in the West?

This debate naturally transitions into a look at national sports. It gave me a great excuse to talk about Sumo and to feature the world's greatest baseball team, sparking a discussion about what truly constitutes Japan's national sport and what we mean by the term "national sport".

Beyond sports, we must examine other potent national symbols: the controversial Yasukuni Shrine, the even more contentious war museum adjacent to it, and the right-wing nationalist trucks that parade through the streets. Ironically, these protests often have no real audience other than curious foreigners holding cameras.

In this second edition, I have expanded the discussion on the Self-Defense Forces. Last January, I took a boat tour around Yokosuka, which was a fascinating look at the vessels of the Maritime Self-Defense Force. For the naval experts among us: can you tell what kind of vessel is pictured here? It is not an aircraft carrier; officially, it is classified as a "helicopter carrier." Furthermore, on international military databases, Japan's submarines are classified as "attack submarines." The juxtaposition of an "attack submarine" operated by a "Self-Defense Force" raises fascinating questions about Japan's pacifist constitution.

As we examine these military shifts, we must never forget the tragedy of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which continue to shape Japan's national consciousness. We are approaching a critical juncture as the *hibakusha* (atomic bomb survivors) age and pass away. Next year marks the 80th anniversary. It will likely be the last major milestone where surviving *hibakusha* can personally recount their memories of the bombings. By the 90th anniversary, any surviving witnesses would have been infants or toddlers at the time, unable to offer firsthand testimonies. We must preserve these memories. If we do not, we risk seeing political figures, whether Vladimir Putin or Donald Trump, fail to understand the unthinkable gravity of using nuclear weapons. This is a vital conversation to keep alive, especially as discussions about Japan acquiring nuclear deterrents occasionally surface.

Chapter 8: Transnationalism & Isolation

The final chapter looks at transnationalism and isolation. While Japan is a deeply integrated member of the global community, it also experiences periods of isolation. To illustrate, the slide shows the rugby stadium in Kamaishi, which successfully hosted matches during the Rugby World Cup. However, if you look at the background and the lower images, you will notice the massive concrete sea walls constructed to protect against future tsunamis. This raises an interesting question: why are these massive defenses built in rural areas (*inaka*) like Kamaishi, but not around Tokyo Bay or along the southern coast, which face imminent threat from the Nankai Trough? It is a contradiction worth pondering.

We can also look at tourism statistics. The number of international visitors was skyrocketing right up until the pandemic, at which point Japan entered what I describe as its "second *sakoku*" (period of isolation). The entry restrictions were notoriously tight, and as the borders slowly reopened, the regulations were highly inconsistent. To put the current tourism boom into perspective: when I visited Japan this past July, the number of foreign visitors topped three million in that single month. That is more than the total number of foreign visitors for the entire year of 1989, which happened to be the year of my very first visit. That is a testament to how much the country has opened up.

This influx has transformed daily life. Today, you are frequently served by foreign workers in convenience stores, leading to amusing moments where you both hesitate, wondering: "Which language should we use? English? Japanese? Or should we just point at the self-checkout screen?"

The chapter also maps where visitors to Japan come from versus where Japanese tourists travel. Furthermore, we encounter the familiar issue of inconsistency, specifically in language accessibility. The information provided for non-Japanese speakers varies wildly: sometimes it's English only; other times it includes Mandarin, Korean, Cantonese, European languages, or even Portuguese in specific communities. Increasingly, you are directed to QR codes, alphanumeric line numbers, and graphic symbols. The landscape of communication is shifting rapidly.

Finally, we come to the last pair of images, which in many ways represent the genesis of this second edition. In the first edition, I wrote about the upcoming Tokyo 2020 Olympics as a future event. Now that they are behind us, this edition reflects on the legacy of the Games and other major events. For the eagle-eyed among you, the top photo here is the same one you will see on my final slide.

To close, you may have noticed the background pattern on my slides, it is the same design featured on the book's cover. My question to you is: how many emojis are hidden in it? The answer, of course, is forty-two.

Thank you very much.