

The Lost "Human Country"

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By Uchihashi Katsuto

Translated and Introduced by Ben Middleton

Uchihashi Katsuto is a well-known political and economic critic. Born in Kobe in 1932, he worked as a journalist with the Kobe Shimbun newspaper until 1967, when he became a freelance journalist and writer. He is the author of more than seventy books and frequently appears on radio and television. This 'essay' is his keynote address at a June 2005 symposium celebrating the 60th anniversary of the influential monthly Sekai (The World).

The title of this essay, 'The Lost "Human Country,"' may appear bewildering, but the central term has a long history in Japanese discourse. 'Human country' (ningen no kuni) was used by Christians to translate biblical expressions such as those given in English as 'kingdoms of this world' (Rev. 11:15) or 'human society' (Daniel 4:31). Christians in Japan have a history of social and political activism since at least the Heiminsha (Commoners' Society) was established to oppose the Russo-Japanese War of 1905. This spirit of resistance has provided ethical support for many contemporary opposition movements.

Recently, 'human country' has become both a powerful political catchcry and ideal, coming to prominence in the wake of the Great Hanshin Earthquake that devastated Kobe in January 1995. When it became clear that government intransigence and bungling had left it unable to

answer citizens' needs, bestselling novelist Oda Makoto published a damning indictment, 'Is this a Human Country?' in the Asahi Shimbun. He argued fiercely that the government had a strong responsibility to provide public assistance to victims. [1] Oda lamented that 'Japan is a rich country, but at the moment it's not a country for human beings.'



The Great Hanshin Earthquake in Kobe

'Human country' thus implies a country in which it is possible to lead a fully human life, i.e. a life of dignity and self-realization. NGOs and relief activists took up this emotive phrase

with vigor, and it still resonates strongly in protests against `heartless` neo-liberal economic restructuring.

Uchihashi is of the same generation as Oda, and writes in the tradition of this ethical-liberal social movement. This essay is representative of Uchihashi's recent work opposing neo-liberalism and corporate globalization.

Sixty years after the end of WWII, what is happening in our society? If we can pick up the fragments of reality and unravel its background `mechanisms,` then the skeleton of the system whose mantle covers our epoch becomes manifest, and we can start to recognize just what were the `choices of postwar Japan` and what choices are being made at present.

For example, in Japan, which has the longest life expectancy of any country in the world, four in ten people reportedly feel that they `do not wish to lead a long life.` This is from a postal survey conducted by the National Center for Geriatrics and Gerontology not just of elderly people, but of 2,300 people aged 20 to 80 (90% response rate).

Young people witness the `treatment` of the elderly, while the elderly, directly realizing their own `everyday hardships,` have come to feel that they `do not wish to lead a long life.`

Over eighty percent (83%) of the whole nation now expresses anxiety about growing old. Why are such large numbers of people unable to feel positive about their future?

At this rate, contemporary Japan will probably go down in history as an unprecedented `failure as a nation with long life-expectancy`.

In October 2004, the number of households receiving social protection topped the one-million mark for the first time since the system

began fifty-five years ago. The number of beneficiaries increased by 60 percent in just ten years with approximately half being elderly households, of which 90% are elderly people living alone.



The homeless

Yet according to a survey by a foreign securities firm, one in six of the world's `millionaires` is Japanese, and in Japan there is a wealthy strata of some 1,340,000 people with net assets exceeding US\$1 million (excluding residential real estate). One-percent of the total population comprise a wealthy strata with assets over 100 million yen.

Banks, which until just last year were considered public institutions, are now running wild trying to target this wealthy strata. Special financial products directed toward the wealthy strata promote the principle that `wealth begets wealth.` One bank now targets individuals with financial assets over 300 million yen, while another has set up a special team aimed at those with assets over 500 million yen. Competition becomes reality. It goes without saying that securities firms are also in on the act.

What does it say when a mood of `anxiety` that prevents people from taking simple delight in `living out the term of their natural lives` has cast its pall over society, while one in six of the

world's millionaires is Japanese?

One cannot say that life in Japan is bright—either for the senior citizens now reaching old age after having lived through the severe wartime era, or for today's youth.

The vision of Japan in the 21st century painted by the Koizumi government only affirms this mode of society, as it chants the mantra that 'a society of disparities is a dynamic society'.

For some time I have argued that countries that are 'lifestyle powers' are governed by different principles than those that are 'economic powers'. After the collapse of the bubble economy, the Miyazawa government proposed its 'vision of Japan as a lifestyle power,' declaring that 'Japan has become an economic power, so next it should become a lifestyle power.' However, things didn't work out that way. Most Japanese now realize that choosing the path of economic power implicitly meant the kind of nation-building whereby the people could not even delight in 'living out the terms of their natural lives.'

To return to the question with which I began this lecture, what is happening in our society? The sense of resignation embodied in the contemporary Japanese 'wish not to live long' is a spectacular collective expression.

'Institutionalization of Poverty'

This problem does not simply stop at the dimensions of social welfare, provision of nursing care for the elderly, or the society of disparity. What I want to emphasize is the fact that 'disparities in existential risk' are now spreading on a global scale.

We can no longer discuss the growing disparities that cover society simply in terms of income and assets. In fact, in the US it functions as 'disparities in existential risk.'

Michael Moore, director of *Fahrenheit 9/11*, has shown that of the American troops exposing their lives to danger in the invasion of Iraq, only one child of a congressman or senator is among them, while a disproportionate number of those lost in battle came from impoverished regions characterized by large numbers of free school-lunch program recipients.

It is reported that one-third of the personnel of the aircraft carrier USS Kitty Hawk, which played an important role in the attack on Iraq, are the children of Hispanic and Asian migrants. [2] They volunteer in order to gain 'full citizenship' (the period required to acquire citizenship is reduced by military service and a recommendation from the military).

The foundation of the volunteer armed forces system that replaced the conscription system that was abolished after the Vietnam War is 'institutionalized poverty'. Excluding career soldiers, why do people, especially high-school students, respond to military recruiters and set off to harsh fields of battle?

'Poverty,' which arises from structural disparities and 'differential citizenship rights,' forms the basis of the volunteer military system. It is clear that the world's greatest military power is based upon elaborate social institutions that continually advance the 'impoverishment and immiseration' of sections of the population. But just what are these social institutions?

What is it that America, which domestically finds the generation of 'poverty' to be essential, wants to spread outside its borders as a 'universal system' in international society? We can gain insight by first looking at one aspect of the problem.

Let me give a concrete example. What is at stake in the surging ravages of war that have

followed from the attack against Iraq?

In 1957, I began my journey as a newspaper reporter. Forty-eight years have since passed. One of the first lessons drummed into me was, 'do not position your camera on the side that is attacking.' In the struggles over the US-Japan Security Treaty (Ampo), it was an iron law that we were not to point our camera from the side of the riot police. Today, reporters from the various major broadcasting firms ride in transporters with the attacking side, that is, in American tanks towards Baghdad.

However, at least freelance journalists and NGOs have continued living in the cities under attack, and have attempted first to monitor closely the activities of the incoming American forces.

For example, the French NGO, ATTAC, has been among the first to report to the world through the internet what the attacking American troops are doing in the occupied territories.

Feeding the Market Economy

South of Baghdad is the port city, Umm Qasr. Basic infrastructure was comprehensively destroyed by the American assault. The municipal water system no longer functions, so supplies of drinking water became inadequate. The US military's first response was to search for residents who owned tanker-lorries. They then provided water free of charge to the comparatively wealthy water-tanker owners and told them to sell it.

In the Islamic world, there is a religious precept prohibiting the receipt of profit other than as compensation for legitimate labor. For example, Islamic banks operating under Sharia law may not charge interest.

This Islamic precept is a great barrier to the world-marketization advanced by America.

It goes without saying that money tied to information technology (IT) is in the vanguard of globalization. This 'IT money' differs from the money that you and I use to buy bread at the baker's. IT money must self-propagate, circulate endlessly.

In 1997, the Asian Financial Crisis occurred when IT money took aim at the Thai baht, hammering the market with waves of massive selling several times greater than the economic power of single nations, only to buy back at prices that had been hedged. Fully exploiting financial engineering techniques, astronomical profits were extracted from Thailand. Savings that wage-workers had diligently squirreled away from their wages became as worthless as wastepaper.

This was truly 'false economics.' It did not produce anything. It is not reward earned as compensation for labor.

In the Islamic world, there is a fundamental resistance towards this sort of false economy. However to finance capitalism, nothing is more offensive than this resistance. So they started 'feeding' the market economy in the Islamic world.

'The post-Saddam Hussein regime should be reconstructed according to the principles of Milton Friedman, ' who provided the theoretical underpinnings of market fundamentalism.

Several months before the invasion of Iraq, the strategy of 'privatizing Iraq' was publicized through conferences convoked by the Heritage Foundation, by Robert MacFarlane and others, and was then taken up by the Wall Street Journal and other papers.

Their Iraq-strategy for the post-Hussein era is based on the 'Friedman principles' of (1) implementing complete privatization (2) establishing of property rights, and (3)

liberalizing corporate activity.

This was called the ‘Iraq reconstruction strategy.’ The US State Department declared it ‘most important’ to develop a modern legal environment in contemporary Iraq so as to establish private property rights.

The sale of drinking water in Umm Qasr was ‘lesson #1’ in this process. What the American neo-cons ordered was a ‘market-economy doctrine’. This drove a ‘psychological wedge’ into the Islamic precept.

‘You can earn a good return without doing legitimate work. All you need is a tanker-lorry, and we’ll fill it up with water for free, and you can earn money just by selling it ...’

This is why I call it ‘feeding’ the market economy.

When things went well at Umm Qasr, Baghdad was next, and so on, with the Americans making the Iraqis sell drinking water—a fundamental condition for the existence of human life.

They continue these moves to marketize the Islamic sphere. The G8’s humanistic decision to ‘cancel’ debts held by Heavily Indebted Countries in Sub-Saharan Africa is also to be welcomed, but it too is implicated in this long-term strategy of marketizing the world.

We are all caught up in this tidal current and exposed to its torrents. And Japan under the banner of Koizumi’s structural reform program, no less, is attempting to build up the momentum of this tidal current even further.

Yet the Japanese people are greeting this with gentle applause. Why has this come to pass?

It goes without saying that it is a consequence of the ‘choices’ Japan made in the postwar. I believe that we must reconsider the choices for

the future on the basis of retracing the choices made since the 1960s.

The Insurmountable ‘Prewar’

Almost all Japanese believe that Japanese society was utterly transformed after defeat in the Asia-Pacific War. Under the control of the Allied Occupation Army, a whole series of postwar reforms took place that indeed led towards reducing extreme disparities of wealth—starting with dismemberment of the zaibatsu, land reform, workplace reform, and tax reform.

During the prewar, the Gini coefficient [3] was 0.55. In the postwar through the 1970s, it decreased to around 0.35, indicative of a sharp reduction in income inequality.

However, more than a little of ‘the prewar’ passed through the gaps in the net of postwar reforms and has gained a new lease on life, or is attempting to make a comeback. It is easy to discover the transformed ‘prewar elements’ in the realm of economics, slowly pushing back the apparent achievement of economic democratization.

For example, despite differing in form, the revived ‘prewar’ is consolidated in the following three aspects. First, in a social structure giving bureaucrats absolute superiority. Second, in the structure of income transfers. Third, in a society dominated by a unitary conception of values.

Today there is much clamoring over ‘reform’, but the structural problems that ought by rights to be the objects of reform should involve overcoming the old and new ‘prewar elements’ to move towards an ethical vision of society.

In reality, the opposite is occurring, with the three structural problems mentioned above simply intensifying as a result of deregulation

and extreme market fundamentalism—in other words, as a result of the mad torrent of neo-liberal reform.

It is important to note that this so-called structural reform is giving rise to a new array of structural problems. That is why I call them ‘sleight of hand reforms’. This needs a little explanation.

First, the starting point of postwar democracy was the dismantling of the prewar Home Ministry and the military. Under the new constitutional doctrine that sovereignty inheres in the people, upper-level bureaucrats became ‘public servants’ and the hierarchical relation between ‘the top and all of those below’ was supposed to have disappeared. However, this did not happen. Appropriating the new structural adhesion of politics, bureaucracy and business, the social structure giving bureaucrats absolute supremacy became more firmly entrenched.

Under the Koizumi government’s catch-cry of ‘from government to the people’ (*kan kara min e*), old-style bureaucrats in the Finance Ministry have cemented an unprecedented position of power.

When the people hear the word ‘reform’ (*kaikaku*), they give a huge round of applause before knowing what is actually implied. They don’t even bother to ask. In the early Showa period, it was the military itself that was reformist and innovative. To those who know history, it is obvious what those reformist bureaucrats did in the name of ‘reform’.

Two fictions are at work behind the gimmick of ‘from government to the people’. The first is that the ‘people’ (*min*) in this phrase implies not the people of the nation (*kokumin*) nor the citizenry (*shimin*) but the ‘people’ who own the private capital that makes up the Japan Business Federation. [4] They see new chances to pursue profit through the ‘corporatizing of

the public sector’.

The other fiction is the ‘extension of the bureaucracy’ (*kan no gaienka*). This goes beyond *amakudari* (the practice of high-ranking government officials parachuting into related private-sector jobs), as in recent years the bureaucracy has burrowed into both the private sector and politics in a parasite-host relationship, and is devouring the ‘private.’ The number of bureaucratic institutions disguised as private is exploding, as can be seen from the transformation of national universities into independent administrative corporations, the proliferation of policy recommendation groups otherwise known as think-tanks etc. And there is an increasing trend of bureaucrats becoming politicians.

Skillfully manipulating the aversion of the Japanese people against the ‘social structure giving bureaucrats absolute supremacy’, they proclaimed a punitive campaign against the bureaucracy with the result that the top strata of bureaucrats grow fat while ordinary front-line government employees become the target of bashing. This is the reality of Koizumi’s structural reforms.

What then of the second reform, the structure of income transfers? The disposal of bad loans in the banking sector is proceeding apace, and the government has declared that economic recovery is starting to get back on track. But what is driving this recovery? Asking this question throws into relief the structure, ‘from the people to corporations and the bureaucracy’. Already now for a long time the savings we entrust to banks have been earning 0% interest. So where has the ‘income that should by rights have been earned’ disappeared? To the financial institutions and related corporations.

Japanese banks collect funds at zero cost, and recently they have been turning them over to the high-interest consumer credit industry.

According to the Bank of Japan, the amount of income transferred in this way amounts to some 154 trillion yen in the ten years to 2004.

Further, with the collapse of the bubble economy, individual assets experienced an extreme decline in value, while the value of debts remained unchanged, creating a structure of 'debt deflation'. While the face value of home loans remained constant, the value of the houses themselves tumbled. This repeats the 'prewar' experience of the 1927 Showa financial crisis.

The third problem, the dominance of society by a unitary conception of values, is another Japanese pathology. The posture of the ministers in the Koizumi cabinet is exactly that of lackeys serving a dictatorial company boss, offering up their loyalty just like rank-and-file corporate directors or salaried workers. The old strata of Japanese society Maruyama Masao criticized as being weak before the strong and strong before the weak has not disappeared.

The philosopher Kuno Osamu called this conformism 'synchronization with the top': 'While the post-Meiji state destroyed the communal lives of people living in natural villages, it enacted the fantasy of overlaying the communality of the natural villages on the state, thus creating the fiction of the communal state. The façade of the emperor system was a system of ideological conformism towards the state, while behind it Japan Inc, based on a faith in productivity, was a system of conformity. The state, which was often called the 'second village', appropriated the communality of the 'first village' and constituted a system based on the illusory pretense of this appropriated communality.' [5]

Kuno writes that in this sort of society, there is no ground for dissenters to stand, as they are immediately labeled 'unpatriotic' or 'disloyal to the company'.

Moreover, 'rebellion' and 'heresy' are rejected outright, so that space for democracy to develop is denied. Kuno continues that the unifying secret that allows a society like Japan to come into being is the twin pillars of faith and profit/interest (rieki).

We can say that almost thirty years ago, the late Kuno Osamu was able to see through to the essence of Koizumi-politics and reforms.

With this sort of insight, we can clearly see that the high levels of support enjoyed by the Koizumi regime stems from this kind of conformism to the top.

How powerful the spell that has been cast over the 'present' by the insurmountable 'prewar'!

The Decline of 'The People' and the Predominance of 'Power'

I want to conclude with a point that I must emphasize. That is, the formation of public opinion in Japan increasingly takes place through ideas initiated by a ruling stratum that includes the government as well as academia and business interests. This is called 'reform' and the nation seems rather to enjoy being dragged along by it—in other words, by the radical decline of a discourse of 'the people' and the predominance of a discourse of 'power'.

By a discourse of 'power' I mean those discourses that descend from the 'peaks' embodied by the interests of the side wielding power, authority and jurisdiction. The most defining characteristic of the Koizumi government is the phenomenon that 'reform' always originates from a 'discourse of power', is always defined through power, and ideas opposing it as well as dissenters always end up becoming objects of exclusion by being labeled either 'defenders of entrenched interests' or 'rebels'.

This is especially deplorable among so-called `scholars` who actively expend their energies in the formation, dissemination and universalization of discourses of power, and swarm around political power.

Wasn't democratic society meant to have drawn its breath of life and then matured through a process in which ideas arise from amongst the people—citizens—transforming society and ultimately demanding changes of politicians and political authority?

In contrast to the Meiji period, when a rising tide of popular sentiment started the fires of change that ushered in the era of constitutional parliamentary politics, what is happening today with the clamor for privatization of the postal system? One day, all of a sudden, talk of privatization blew up and the next thing you know, it had become a `trend of the times`. But if you trace its origins, you find that it has been a long-held goal of mainstream business circles.

The present situation is precisely a case of what Kuno calls conformism. This condition is intensifying, with people falling over themselves in a homogenizing rush—a phenomenon of `frenetic homogenization`.

While the Koizumi administration consciously ensures the dominance of the discourse of power, a section of academia vies to offer intellectual support. Noting these developments, some people are arguing that `it is a good thing that academics have started engaging in actual policy formation so that the ivory towers have fallen by the wayside, becoming just part of the nation's cultural heritage`.

In this way, the decline of discourses of the people is accelerating. It is democracy per se that is now at crisis point.

Koizumi declared that he would `destroy the

LDP`, yet there is nothing more `LDP` than the Koizumi administration.

Keidanren (Japan Federation of Economic Organizations), that pinnacle of the Japanese business world, has now merged with Nikkeiren (Japan Federation of Employers' Associations) to form the Nihon Keidanren (Japan Business Federation). It wields immense political influence through the Council on Fiscal and Economic Policy and important government advisory committees. The Japan Business Federation is unrelenting in its strong support for the Koizumi administration. It is now even pushing for a review of the `Three Principles on Arms Export`, as well as for amendment of the constitution. [6]



Keidanren Headquarters

Although Koizumi has declared himself to be of no particular faction or `tribe` of policymakers, in truth he is the most powerful agent of the `Japanese business circles tribe` (*Nihon zaikai-*

zoku), and has brought off in a short space of time what the LDP has long desired and attempted to achieve. Therefore, as a politician, he is even more LDP than the LDP. This holds too for the Japan Association of Corporate Executives (*Keizai Doyukai*) and the Japan Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

As far as I am aware, even though they both represent business interests, historically there have been great differences in ideals and comments, and especially on policy prescriptions, between the Japan Business Federation and the Japan Association of Corporate Executives. They have represented diversity in a strong sense.

In a book that Shiroyama Saburo recently wrote with me, he remarked that when we were university students, *laissez-faire* capitalism was simply not possible. People actively engaged the idea that unless constraints—in various senses—were set on capitalism, and elements that should be reformed were not reformed, capitalism itself could not survive. But now, such ideas have almost disappeared. Instead, a unitary conception of capitalism is thrust down our throats. For example, the ideals of the Japan Association of Corporate Executives long stood within the genealogy of revisionist capitalism. Yet now, if the Association of Corporate Executives even engages in debate on how to stimulate the business cycle, it neglects the fundamental questions of how to make capitalism into—to use an offbeat expression—something healthy, something geared towards human well-being and happiness. What has happened to the kindness of managers and capitalists? [7]

Today, is there any difference in the comments of Japan Business Federation Chairman Okuda and the comments of Japan Association of Corporate Executives Chairman Kitashiro? Like an echo resonating, they use exactly the same words and the same postures to support the

Koizumi reforms in a chorus of approval for the *‘discourse of authority’*.

Is this not representative of the conformism in politics, the bureaucracy, academia and business as a whole? As the French writer, Viviane Forrester, puts it: *‘People are no longer even the objects of exploitation. Now people are instead the objects of exclusion.’* [8]

How can *‘reforms’* aimed at human exclusion possibly be reforms?

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Translation for Japan Focus by Ben Middleton, Associate Professor of Sociology, Ferris University, Yokohama. His article on the work of the Heiminsha to realize a type of globalization-from-below, recently appeared in Umemori Naoyuki (ed.) "Teikoku wo ute: Heiminsha 100-nen kokusai shinpojium," Tokyo: Ronsosha, 2005. (The Heiminsha group put up the only sustained opposition to the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05.) He is presently researching 20th century Japanese sociology, especially the work of Takata Yasuma.

Notes

[1] Oda Makoto's essay, *‘Is this a Human Country?’* (*Kore wa 'ningen no kuni' ka*) appeared in the evening edition of the *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper on year after the earthquake, on 17 January 1996. He subsequently expanded it into a book of the same title that was published by Chikuma Shobo in 1998.

[2] The USS Kitty Hawk has been based at Yokosuka, Japan, since August 1998 as America's only permanently forward-deployed [aircraft carrier](#).

[3] The Gini coefficient is an index of economic inequality; a society in which income is

perfectly equally distributed registers as 0, while a perfectly unequal society registers as 1, so that the coefficient increases and approaches 1 as inequality increases.

[4] Uchihashi simply refers to Keidanren, but it is now part of a new organization, the Nippon Keidanren (Japan Business Federation), formed from the amalgamation of Keidanren (Japan Federation of Economic Organizations) and Nikkeiren (Japan Federation of Employers' Associations) in May 2002.

[5] *Kami wa saibu ni yadoritamau* (God resides in the details), San'ichi shobo, 1977.

[6] The Three Principles prohibit Japan from exporting arms to the following countries or regions: (1) communist bloc countries; (2) countries subject to arms export embargo under United Nations Security Council resolutions; and (3) countries involved in or likely to be involved in international conflicts. The Principles were submitted to the Diet by the Sato Eisaku cabinet in 1967, and have

remained the basic policy concerning Japan's weapons exports, although they were revised somewhat by the Miki and Nakasone administrations. More recently in February 2004, Keidanren moved to loosen the provisions to facilitate the further development of Japan's weapons industry. These moves have been largely accepted by the Koizumi cabinet, which for example moved in December 2004 to permit Japanese collaboration in the US Missile Defense (MD) program as an 'exception' to the Three Principles. See a [summary](#) of the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs official policy on the principles. For a recent assessment of Japan's arms trade see Robin Ballantyne, [Japan's Hidden Arms Trade](#).

[7] *'Ningen fukko' no keizaigaku wo mezashite* (Aiming for an Economics of 'Human Revival'), Asahi Shimbunsha, 2004

[8] *Keizai no kyofu* (L'horreur économique) (The Economics of Fear). Japanese trans.: Maruyama gakugei tosho, 1998.