

# *Exploring Reasons for Japan's Post-War Political Stagnation*

Shiyu Long<sup>1,a,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*BASIS International School Guangzhou, Huangpu District, Guangzhou, 510663, China*

*a. Shiyu.long13616-bigz@basischina.com*

*\*corresponding author*

**Abstract:** After the Second World War, the militarist, corporatist system of the imperial Japan had collapsed. Since then, Japan adopted a democratic system centered around the Liberal Democratic Party. This paper analyzed the political situation of Japan after the Second World War by exemplifying and investigating Japan's political Stagnation. By analyzing the political situation of Japan, this research reveals the significance of political reformation and progression. This study selected and analyzed 15 different sources including books, articles and videos Economically, post-war Japan had a heavy reliance on the United States since the Korean War. Although the bubble economy of Japan through the 1970s provided the Japanese population with political confidence to an extent, The collapse of the bubble economy stopped Japan's economic growth. Since then, Japan had entered "the lost thirty years". In addition to the reasons aforementioned, political bureaucratization, lack of actual changes and powerful implicit order caused changing the status quo harder. These are the main factors working behind Japan's political stagnation.

**Keywords:** Japan, politics, Post-WWII, Cold War, stagnation

## 1. Introduction

As one of the most prominent technology, industry, and trade centers of the world, Japan regained its geopolitical significance after the Second World War. In 2017, Japan's nominal GDP reached 4.87 Trillion USD [1]. After the Second World War, General Headquarters (GHQ) freed Japanese people from the sufferings brought by the corporatist, militarist system [2]. Japan was no longer allowed to retain a massive army, and the United States was able to station garrisons in Japan. As an alternative, Japan became a constitutional monarchy under a free-market capitalist system. Emperor Hirohito published the Ningen Sengen (lit. Human Declaration), in which he declared himself as a human, not a god. Since then, the emperor has become a spiritual icon, as he has little actual power compared to the power he had during the war. However, the new, democratic system does not come without its flaws. Many war criminals, such as Emperor Hirohito and Kishi Nobusuke, remained intact after the Tokyo Trials. As a result, the conservative-leaning Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) became the dominant party in the House of Representatives. Under the GHQ rule, left-leaning population of Japan had to seek measures other than parliamentary struggle. As a result, prominent leftist movements decreased the political stability of Japan. For instance, the Struggle for Security Procedure led to the downfall of Kishi Nobusuke. The system also lacked power center and effective elections. Before the 1980s, Japan's prominent bubble economy allowed the politicians to justify the system. When the bubble economy of Japan eventually broke during the 1990s, the system's flaws were exposed [3].

However, it is uneasy about reforming the system in the sight of the public, since is previously propagated as “successful”. As a result, Apathy and stagnation plagued Japan’s political environment, which are represented in Japan’s low voter turnout. In 2021, Japan’s House of Representatives Election voter turnout is 55.93% [4]. By contrast, the voter turnout for the United States Mid-term Election of 2022 is 69.1% [5]. By investigating Japan’s situation, it is possible to gain further insight of Asia’s status quo. Previous works, for instance, *The Authoritarian Structure of Japan: From a Bureaucratic Cabinet System to a Parliamentary Cabinet System*, had explained Japan’s political status quo and its disadvantages. The system, the environment and the society had all been thoroughly investigated previously in other works. However, the stagnation, or the lack of development, is rarely discussed. This paper will explore the political stagnation of Japan and explain its formation. This paper will first explain the historical situation of Japan during the formation of its political status quo. Then, this paper will relate the phenomena and formation of the political stagnation to political thinkers’ theories.

## 2. The Symptoms of Japan Getting into Apathy

Since 1955, the LDP had only lost general elections thrice. As a right-wing party, the LDP defends “liberty” as market and individual liberty under the free-market capitalist system. After the Second World War, Japan’s industry and economy were devastated. At which point, in order to re-establish societal order based on a free-market capitalist system, there has to be an opportunity for Japan to rapidly develop its economy. In the 1950s, the outbreak of the Korean War created a demand for industrial output by the United States and its allies. Japan was able to take advantage of this chance and revive its economy. However, this also increased Japan’s economic reliance on the United States. In the next few decades, Japan’s bubble economy expands rapidly, which allowed hedonism to further develop. In March 1960, Japan’s real GDP growth reached 16.6% [6]. In 1985, Japan and the United States signed the Plaza Accords, in which Japan agrees to appreciate its currency against the dollar. This further severed Japan’s bubble economy. The government adopted contractionary policy to address high real estate prices. Banks are stuffed with bad debts. Appreciation of the Japanese Yen eventually led to outflow of the manufacturing industry. Japan’s bubble economy broke, and the “lost twenty years” begun.

Voters of Japan tried to escort to other parties before, but the result was not as optimistic as the politicians promised. After the economic crisis of 2008, the LDP was punished by the voters. The Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) became the governing party. However, unlike LDP, the DPJ lacked experience in running the government. The triumvirate of the JDP disabled the party from being powerful, which are necessary for the DPJ to ensure its regime could last long. This weakness was fully exposed during 2011, when earthquake and tsunami caused tremendous damages. However, as the people needed help from the government the most, Kan Naoto, the Prime minister at the point, failed to handle the situation effectively [7]. The public were disappointed regarding the DPJ administration. As a consequence, DPJ was punished by voters in the next election. The voters became more apathetic, knowing that there are probably no other suitable candidates other than the LDP.

As such, Japan experiences economic stagnation since the break of the bubble economy, hedonism among society since the bubble economy, heavy United States influence since the Korean War, and a group of severely apathetic voters since 2011.

### **3. Reasons for Japan's Political Stagnation**

#### **3.1. Disenchantment and Failing to Re-inject Charisma**

Japan is one of the most obvious examples of how the disenchantment of the world affects politics. Max Weber suggested that plebiscitary democracy could inject charisma back into politics by emphasizing the image of the leader, the politician [8]. Prime minister in Japan is undeniably powerful, yet Japanese voters are still apathetic. Modernization of Japan does not only exist in its economical and industrial developments, but also the types of authorities, or powers, that existed in the socio-political environments. On one hand, the absolute loyalty towards the emperor, as a form of traditional authority, was dismantled by the GHQ. The coerced national identity based on the cult of the emperor had since demised. However, other forms of traditional authority did remain in the society, which would be discussed later in the paper. On the other hand, legal-rational authority became increasingly important in Japan. Japan after the war focused on economic growth and industrial development, by which trading in a free-market context became increasingly important. Business successes of individuals, therefore, became the role model for the society. The society now focuses on profits and losses instead of values and localness. The Japanese people were being freed — but also experiencing disenchantment.

There are some leaders of post-war Japan who had employed charisma. For instance, Koizumi Junichiro, who proposed a postal system reform, and Abe Shinzo, who promised to “take back Japan” [9]. Koizumi Junichiro was able to impress the Japanese public with his radical ideals and unique character. At the moment, the public were obsessed with his promise of change and counterintuitive disposition. Abe Shinzo took advantage of the failure of the JDP. He had served as the Prime Minister before. At which point, he is able to brand himself as a beacon of stability of hope, who can bring Japan back to prosperity. However, as Weber argued, charismatic authority do not last long, as charisma rely on the existence of a person, as an icon, who will eventually demise in one way or another [8]. Koizumi Junichiro retired as he failed to reform the system. The postal system reform did not Abe Shinzo had been assassinated in 2022 during a campaign. In this sense Japan perfectly fits Weber's idea of “modernity”, where legal-rational authority and disenchantment dominates politics. However, plebiscitary democracy, which is supposed to bring back charismatic elements back into politics, did not work according to Weber's wishes in Japan, as the parliament, thus the prime minister, bureaucratizes.

#### **3.2. Perception, Reality and the Lack of Actual Changes**

As Japan entered an era of capitalistic economy, commercial interests became prioritized. From the rapid economic development of the 1950s to the bubble economy through the 1980s, the post-war capitalistic economic system had since became the norm. However, as the system is thoroughly adopted and accepted, it is harder to address the problems under this system with nationwide policies. New oligopolies are able to form easily when the economy is already developed under a loosely regulated, free-market system. Thus, capitalists are able to utilize their connections, and resources to exert heavy economical and political influence. Therefore their demands are to be met and their interests are to be prioritized. At the expense of the lack of political changes and developments, corporations and the LDP are able to keep their power intact. How democratic post-war Japan is became not very important.

In a commercial published in 2012, when the LDP were about to take back the regime from DPJ, Abe Shinzo promised to “take back” Japan's economy, education and relief [9]. The phrase “take back” was employed under the context of the DPJ administration, when the LDP lost its power as the ruling party. However in order to revive the Japanese economy, the influence of mega-corporations

needs to be reduced. This would be the last thing the LDP wants to do since the LDP had always leaned conservative. It is also impossible to return Japan's economical situation to its situation in the 1970s. Devastating effects of the break of the economic bubble had damaged the Japanese economy enough. Making another economic bubble, and letting it break, would only make things worse. As a result, Japan under Abe Shinzo's administration lacked progression and change. Japan's real GDP growth from 2014 to 2019 had only fluctuated around zero percent [10]. The LDP did not take significant advantage of the voters, who are disillusioned with the DPJ government. As the LDP took back Japan's regime, which the economy that they promised to take back had little significance politically.

### 3.3. The Power of Discipline and Soul-making

Obviously, absolutist power of the emperor had disappeared after the Second World War. However, disciplinary power [11], as Michel Foucault explained, remained intact and prominent. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Japanese government did not order the shutting down of public places, as it is against the law. Instead the government asked citizens to restrain themselves from going to public places, hence the term *jishuku* (lit. self-restrain). Technically, participating in self-restrain is not compulsory. However, there are a portion of the population call the *jishuku keisatsu* (lit. self-restrain police) who commits harassment against ordinary pedestrians and shops out of a sense of justice. The term *jishuku keisatsu* reached its peak of search frequency on Google in May 2020 [12]. In this case the disciplinary power is expressed as *kuuki* (lit. Air, or atmosphere). Although technically there are no laws forcing one to obey, people still do because it is the norm. Indeed, social norms and peer pressures exist in all societies, but what makes *kuuki*, in Japan, special is the properties it bears. *kuuki* compensated the relatively weak government of post-war Japan, which allowed it to develop into a significant source of power in the society. For instance, the House of Representatives focused on the contrast and conflict between the different parties in the process of proposing an act. Whereas the House of Councilors focused on collaboration and cooperation across different parties to polish and amend an act [3]. Although there are no concrete laws appointing the roles of different houses, spontaneous actions eventually formed an unspoken, yet powerful, order.

Hedonist expressions in Japan could be traced up to Ukiyo-e paintings back in 18th century [13]. Two hundred years later, during Japan's bubble era, the 1970s and 1980s, people had expensive dates, enjoyed ski resorts, even pulled out 10,000 yen bills just to get a taxi driver's attention [14]. However, some had proposed other reasons to Japan's success in that era. The *Nihonjinron* (lit. On Being Japanese) emerged during the era argued that Japan's success stemmed from its national character — the language, the discipline and the management style [15]. This phenomenon relates to power-knowledge, as Foucault stated, because this is an example of how power influenced the formation of knowledge [11]. When significant development occurs under the system, it could be used as an effective form of justification. As such, the government and the system has the virtual power to justify the existence and prolonging of its system. In addition, the conservative government favors both free-market and right-wing ideals. As the leftists are being oppressed, rightist ideologies are able to remain and develop. Therefore, an ideology mixing nationalist narrative, capitalist worldview and traditionalist order is allowed to develop and flourish.

## 4. Discussion

By investigating into Japan's case, and connecting it with different kinds of thinkings, scholars are able to understand the consequences that conservatism and oligarchy could lead to. From the information stated above, it could be concluded that a mixture of East-Asian traditionalist system and free-market capitalist system without proper reformation is the main reason behind Japan's political stagnation. Emphasis on traditionalist order, as a series of strong but unspoken rules, compressed

discursive space and individual liberty. An unregulated, “wild-west” form of free-market capitalism would empower the oligarchs as mega-corporations. As a result policies against oligarch’s interests would be harder to implement and prolong. These obstacles confined Japan to its political status quo, which will, in return, keep changing the status quo harder. Despite that Gen-Z, and younger, population started to emphasize their expression and freedom, emphasis on seniority, as a part of East-Asian traditionalist system, makes younger population relatively weaker than older population. Additionally, the Voting rate among younger population of Japan remained minimal, which further decreases their political influence. Hence, significant socio-political changes and progresses are unlikely to happen in the short run.

Most importantly, Japan’s situation is alerting for the world. Reactionaries and traditionalists seek to restore the old order, the order of pre-modern eras. Overly stressing and coercing the importance of traditional order values and authorities will disable the society to reform itself. Persisting traditional order would only cause stagnation, as Japan’s case had shown, thus making the society outdated. A lack of power diverted to the younger population could also cause apathy among the younger population, which jeopardizes the state’s political future. Hence, the younger population should be allowed to take political initiatives to an extent. Not only should the voting age be decreased, but also they should be included in committees that makes political decisions. Market operations by mega-corporations should also be regulated, or even restricted, in order to prevent them from gaining too much economic, thus political, power. By taking measures aforementioned, political apathy and stagnation could be eased or prevented to an extent.

## 5. Conclusion

Since the downfall of Japan’s fascist regime, the GHQ imposed significant changes to Japan’s political system. As it reformed into a capitalist country, Japan experienced a certain degree of democratization under a dominant party. After the bubble economy collapsed, Japan’s economy stagnated. Voters became more conservative leaning since the failure of the DPJ administration. Parliament, as the political center, had experienced significant disenchantment and bureaucratization. Since the post-war government is weak, the power vacuum is replaced by strong, universal social order. East-Asian traditionalist sentiments make the political stagnation of Japan harder to ease.

Specific political phenomena of Japan, and their significance, could still be separately investigated. For instance, future research could further investigate the attitude towards politics of the Japanese youth. As the generation who will take power in the future, their political significance in the future is massive. Eventually, by examining and analyzing the younger generations, Japan may discover a method to free itself from political stagnation in the future.

## References

- [1] *Worldometer. (2017). Japan GDP. Retrieved from [www.worldometers.info/gdp/japan-gdp/](http://www.worldometers.info/gdp/japan-gdp/).*
- [2] *Liberal Democratic Party of Japan. Before Th Conservative Alliance: Liberal Democratic Party of Japan. Retrieved from [www.jimin.jp/english/about-ldp/history/104228.html](http://www.jimin.jp/english/about-ldp/history/104228.html).*
- [3] *Iio, J, and Lin, Q..(2022). Ri Ben de Tong Zhi Jie Gou: Cong Guan Liao Nei Ge Zhi Dao Yi Hui Nei Ge Zhi.*
- [4] *Nippon.Com. (2023). Japan’s Election Turnout Third Lowest in Postwar Era. Retrieved from [www.nippon.com/en/japan-data/h01156/](http://www.nippon.com/en/japan-data/h01156/).*
- [5] *US Census Bureau. (2023). 2022 Voting and Registration Data Now Available. Retrieved from [www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2023/2022-voting-registration.html](http://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2023/2022-voting-registration.html).*
- [6] *CEIC. Japan Real GDP Growth. Retrieved from [www.ceicdata.com/en/indicator/japan/real-gdp-growth](http://www.ceicdata.com/en/indicator/japan/real-gdp-growth).*
- [7] *Li, T. (2022). Gai Bian Riben Li Shi De Zong Li Da Chen: Cong Yiteng Bowen Dao Antian Wenxiang.*
- [8] *Weber, M, et al. (2013). Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology.*
- [9] *Youtube. (2012). [Jimintou Shin cm (30byou ver).] [Nippon wo Torimodosu]. Retrieved from [www.youtube.com/watch?v=S5rhUHmPbZc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S5rhUHmPbZc).*

- [10] *Tradingeconomics*. (2023). *Japan GDP Growth RATE2023 Data - 2024 Forecast - 1980-2022 Historical - Calendar*. Retrieved from [tradingeconomics.com/japan/gdp-growth](https://tradingeconomics.com/japan/gdp-growth).
- [11] Foucault, M., and Sheridan, A. (2020). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*.
- [12] Matsubara, Y. (2021). *Jishuku-Keisatsu (Self-Restraint Police)' under the COVID-19 Pandemic in Japan : Focusing on Transformation of Discursive Space*. Retrieved from [doi.org/10.18910/8456](https://doi.org/10.18910/8456).
- [13] Toki. (2016). *Perspectives on Japan's Pleasure-Seeking Past: Discovering Ukiyo-e*. Retrieved from [www.toki.tokyo/blogt/2016/2/20/perspectives-on-japans-pleasure-seeking-past-discovering-ukiyo-e](http://www.toki.tokyo/blogt/2016/2/20/perspectives-on-japans-pleasure-seeking-past-discovering-ukiyo-e).
- [14] Saito. M. (2018). *Bright Lights, Big Shoulder Pads: A Timid Japan Recalls Its Bubble Era*. Retrieved from [www.nytimes.com/2018/04/06/business/japan-1980s-bubble-era.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/06/business/japan-1980s-bubble-era.html)
- [15] Huffman, J.L. (2005). *Japanese Society in the Twentieth Century*. *Education About Asia*, Volume 10:2. Retrieved from [www.asianstudies.org/publications/ea/archives/japanese-society-in-the-twentieth-century-2/](http://www.asianstudies.org/publications/ea/archives/japanese-society-in-the-twentieth-century-2/)