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Period of Economic Success vs. Period of Stagnation:

During the history of Japan during the post-World War II 19th century, Japan as a nation has struggled to fully deal with its imperial past, seeking to reinvent its national identity and focusing on idealized aspects of war memory socially, politically, and individually to contribute to said national identities. The foreign point of view and opinion on Japan, held by Western foreigners especially, also changed across these historical periods and were usually dependent on Japan's degree of economic success and situations caused by other global events. The spectrum of these foreign opinions looking in on Japan from the outside is also dependent on the different national identities that Japan presented. The period of Japan as a confident economic world power (1972-1989) and the current period of a stagnant, post-economic bubble Japan (1989-present) differ in the aspects of the common Japanese national identity and the outside foreign opinion of Japan as a nation and a people. During the period of the economic bubble in Japan, Japan's national identity was closely associated with the dream of economic stability and prosperity achieved through a good education and company loyalty, while in post-economic bubble Japan, there was a distinct lack of a realized/established Japanese national identity. The foreign opinion of Japan during the period of Japan's economic bubble is one of both appreciation and fear, while the foreign point of view of Japan as a nation during the present period is more dependent on the globalization of Western and Japanese cultures and is characterized by the rise of China as an economic world power.

By the latter half of the 1970s, Japan had proved itself to have advanced enough to become one of the world's leading economic powers, a status that would carry the Japanese

government and people into the 1980s as a nation confident in its successful identity. To properly evaluate the reinvention of the Japanese national identity during the period of the Japanese economic bubble, it is first important to examine the foundation for this new identity laid by events and situations in Japan during the 1950s and 60s. In the late 1950s and especially throughout the 1960s, the Japanese national identity was characterized by Japan's nuclear victimhood and the channeling of post-war nationalism as a sort of redemption on the world scene, which was encouraged by events such as the anti-security treaty movement and the 1964 Tokyo Olympics. This sense of redemption of national pride would only grow through the period of the economic bubble and can be associated with the redemption of Japanese cultural traditions, which had been suppressed in the immediate post-war period, through the rise of cultural nationalism during the 1970s.

There was an initial struggle during the 1970s in the Japanese government between Japanese progressives and Japanese conservatives, but the Japanese conservative party, the LDP, eventually won out due to appealing to the Japanese middle class. In the chapter "Competing Views Japanese Purpose" contained within his book, *The Japanese Question*, Howard Pyle examines the two strategies Japanese conservatives and progressives use to link the current Japanese national identity to traditional Japanese values, hence the rise of cultural nationalism. Japanese progressives believed in Japan's new purpose as a "beacon of peace" and the major supporter of the anti-nuclear movement, and argued that Japan's economic growth was proof of the good of this purpose. Japanese conservatives argued that Japan's economic success could be tied to Japanese cultural traditions and values, giving Japan a competitive advantage.¹ The conservative framing of the Japanese national identity won over the middle class, because with a

¹ Howard Pyle, "Competing Views of Japanese Purpose," in *The Japanese Question*, (Washington, D.C.: The AEI Press, 1996): 48-56.

growth in wealth the Japanese middle class gave them a new kind of self-confidence. This helped to replace the previous post-war periods' national identity focused on critique with the belief that, due to its cultural traditions of industry in the past, Japan was better than Western countries at being an industrial society. All of this is important for the reinvention of the Japanese national identity because it is here the foundations of the "deal" that the LDP promised the Japanese middle class about giving the middle class a stable, prosperous life through a good education and company loyalty in return for political acquiescence to the LDP, which we can see in Japanese society until that promise starts to crumble in post-economic bubble Japan.

The Japanese national education system plays an important role in maintaining this new economically successful Japanese national identity, as it helps foster the idea that any Japanese can have a stable life, as long as they push to be academically successful. In the chapter "University Entrance Exams: A National Obsession," Thomas Rohlen talks about the near-obsession of Japanese society with the education system and how it permeates the entire nation to discuss how this represents the education's systems focus on rewards for success and punishment for failure and therefore this same focus for Japanese society at large.² The majority of Japanese people accepted the education system as the foundation of a good respectable life, which so allowed the aspect of education to help decide the elites of Japanese, therefore helping the formation of the common "Japanese dream." We can also see this idea in the film *Family Game*, directed by Yoshimitsu Morita in 1983, which attempts to critique this idea of the Japanese dream by showing how dysfunctional a normal Japanese family can become in the pursuit of such a economically and systematically focused goal, and how this dream has come to define the Japanese national identity, but ultimately has a negative impact on Japanese society.

² Thomas P. Rohlen, "University Entrance Exams: A National Obsession," in *Japan's High Schools*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983), 77-93.

While *Family Game* is an example of a self-critique of Japanese society, it is also important to note how foreign entities and nations perceived Japan's new identity.

The period during Japan's economic bubble occurred at the height of the Cold War between the U.S. and Russia, which greatly shaped Western opinions of Japan during the 1960s and early 1970s, which were initially more congratulatory in tone and featured transformations of stereotypes of Japan in World War II into more positive characteristics, such as Japan's "unification." Many Westerners were initially in awe or appreciative of the rapid way Japan had bounced back on to the global economic scene, and therefore admired the Japanese economic system. Ezra Vogel, in his chapter "The Japanese Miracle," shares this admiration and examines the sheer extent of Japanese economic and industrial success, and discusses the Japanese and American trade imbalance to show that the Japanese system has more advantages over the American economic system, and therefore suggests that the U.S. should adapt to meet Japan's economic challenge.³ This admiring attitude was not shared by other foreigners, however, as Japan's technical prowess and seemingly obstinate trade policies caused some foreigners, especially Americans, to critique the characteristics of the Japanese system.

The more negative views of Japan that appeared in the late 1980s and lingers into the early 1990s mainly focused on the Japanese economic system, but also began to revive the negative World War II stereotypes by transforming them for a more modern setting. In his article, "Containing Japan" Fallows critiques Japan's economic system. Here, Japanese distinctness and uniqueness is emphasized more negatively, in an "othering" sort of way, which can be exemplified in the last part of Fallows' argument where he asserts that Japan's destructive

³ Ezra F. Vogel, "The Japanese Miracle," in *Japan as Number One*, (New York, NY: Harper Colophon Books, 1980), 9-23.

economic system can be traced to Japan's lack of adherence to universal moral values.⁴ This type of othering and negative portrayals of the Japanese can also be seen in the both the movie trailer for *Black Rain* (1989) and the movie trailer for *Rising Sun* (1993). So, in the article and the movie trailers, we see the wartime Japanese stereotypes resurrected again. These stereotypes are still presented negatively but are changed to fit the tech-driven and industrious period, as Japanese people are presented as emotionless economic robots that distrust foreigners or outsiders. Therefore, the resurrection of old Japanese stereotypes is used to portray Japan as a menace to the American people. This attitude also begins to change in the late 1990s and throughout the 2000s, especially with the end of the Cold War and the rise of China as a global economic power.

After the collapse of the economic bubble that had sustained the Japanese national identity for so long, the national identity built around economic success began to falter and the Japanese people were left without an established national identity, and so began a period of national uncertainty and stagnation. Japanese society received a major shock to its system in the form of the Tokyo Gas Attack of 1995 at the hands of the Aum Shinrikyo cult that grew in influence during this period of the crumbling of the Japanese dream. As we can see in some of the interviews conducted in Haruki Murakami's book, *Underground*, the masterminds and major perpetrators of the Gas Attack belonged to the Japanese society's "super-elites" who rejected the mainstream Japanese narrative of success because it was not meaningful.⁵ This rejection of the Japanese dream shocked the majority of Japanese people and was arguably more shocking/important than the actual victims of the attack to most Japanese. The attack finally

⁴ James Fallows, "Containing Japan," *The Atlantic*, Boston, May 1989, 48-53.

⁵ Haruki Murakami, *Underground*, (New York, NY: Vintage International, 2001).

signaled the start of a period of self-examination for the Japanese people, in order to decide if the current Japanese identity was really still applicable. The crumbling of this narrative of a successful Japanese life can further be seen in the eventual dissolution of the original unwritten contract between the Japanese LDP and middle class due to the recession and then stagnation of the Japanese economy.

The breaking of this promise led to the subsequent struggle of the both the Japanese society and government to again reinvent the Japanese national identity, as there was also an evident struggle in finding meaning in Japanese life, especially during the 2000s. In the film, *Tokyo Sonata*, directed by Kiyoshi Kurosawa in 2009, the main family is forced to come to terms with how to accept their roles in a changing society that is seemingly meaningless. The unraveling effects of the breaking of the LDP promise can be seen in the multiple acts of violence that occur in the film. The article “Escape in Japan,” written by Ian Buruma, also talks about violence in the early 21st century in the growing suicide rates and major murder events.⁶ However, the most important aspect of both the film and Buruma’s article is their discussion of the rejection of reality and the pursuit of escapist outlets that ultimately characterize the Japanese national identity. During this post-economic bubble period, we really get to see the effects of the previous period, especially the effects on how the Japanese people view relationships in society, and this is evident in how the family members in *Tokyo Sonata* are much more fleshed out than the family members in *Family Game* from almost 20 years prior.

One of the most influential forms of escapism in Japan also grew to represent a part of the Japanese national identity, in the growth of pop culture consumption and output in Japan. In the reading from her book, *Anime: From Akira to Howl’s Moving Castle*, Susan Napier presents

⁶ Ian Buruma, “Escape In Japan,” *The New York Review of Books*, June 2009.

anime, which is representative of Japanese pop culture as a whole, as lacking a real, Japanese national identity, but still shows multiple distinct Japanese value systems that work universally.⁷ In his essay, “Japan’s Gross National Cool,” Douglas McGray argues that the globalization of Japanese pop culture is inauthentic in that it does not retain any inherent Japanese values.⁸ From both of these articles, it can be argued that such aspects of the modern Japanese culture, which contributes to the Japanese national identity, or lack thereof, as a whole, are inauthentic and lacking any real distinctly Japanese value or meaning.

The Japanese government was also concerned about the lack of an established Japanese national identity, and its concern was encouraged by the growing movement to change how the Japanese approached war memory. In the chapter “Notes to the Heart,” author Andrea Arai examines the ways in which the Japanese government struggles to recreate a Japanese national identity and narrative that will reinforce the system of “remembering and forgetting” and the aspect of the “sentiment of sacrifice” in the nation, especially concerning the Japanese youth.⁹ This attempt to strengthen the Japanese individual’s relationship to the nation ultimately fails, however, which is evident in the aftermath of the 3/11 earthquake, tsunami, and Fukushima nuclear plant meltdown. In his article, “Post-Crisis Japanese Nuclear Policy: From Top-Down Directives to Bottom-Up Activism,” Daniel P. Aldrich evaluates the disappointing reaction from the Japanese government and authorities by examining the decline in public support of these entities in the 1990s and then evaluating the post-3/11 growth of mistrust of information from

⁷ Susan Napier, “Anime and Local/Global Identity,” in *Anime: From Akira to Howl’s Moving Castle*, (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 15-34.

⁸ Douglas McGray, “Japan’s Gross National Cool,” *Foreign Policy*.

⁹ Andrea G. Arai, “Notes to the Heart,” in *Global Futures in East Asia*, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2013), 174-194.

Japanese government and corporate sources.¹⁰ After the 3/11 disaster, there is an increase of citizen activism in Japan, showing a kind of national self-dependence from government and corporations, which is arguably not exactly what the Japanese government was hoping for in their search for a new post-economic bubble Japanese national identity. In the film, *Land of Hope*, directed by Sion Sono, the self-sufficiency of the Japanese characters is evident, as well as the struggles between these normal characters and the Japanese authorities the characters interact with. By the end of the film, the main characters have all decided to pursue their futures in their own ways, the father and mother through self-decided death, the son and his wife through self-decided ignorance, and the young couple through a self-decided “one-step forward” mentality. In this way, the Japanese people have begun to create a new national identity for themselves, based on self-dependency and mistrust of the current Japanese government.

Over a combined period of over 30 years, the transformation of Japan from a confident economic world power to an economically stagnant, uncertain nation is evident through the consequent reinventions of the Japanese national identity and the changes in foreign opinion of Japan. While Japan’s national identity during the period of its economic bubble was largely reliant on the fashioning of the Japanese government, the bursting of the bubble and the Japanese government’s lacking response to post-bubble period events led the Japanese people to invent their own national identity and narrative based on self-dependency. Foreign opinion of Japan and Japan’s place as a global power was characterized by the transformation of war stereotypes, both positive and negative, but later, foreign opinion of Japan settled into a more questioning role.

¹⁰ Daniel P. Aldrich, “Post-Crisis Japanese Nuclear Policy: From Top-Down Directives to Bottom-Up Activism,” *Analysis from the East-West Center*, January 2012.