

BOOK REVIEW

RIBATARIANIZUMU: AMERIKA WO
YURUGASU JIYŪSHIJŌSHUGI
(LIBERTARIANISM: THE ULTRAFREE-
DOMISM SHAKING UP AMERICA,
PUBLISHED ONLY IN JAPANESE)

YASUSHI WATANABE

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Libertarianism never really caught on in Japan. That is strange when you stop and think about it. For a country that was ruled by a military dictatorship for six hundred years, it might seem that “Freedom!” would be on the lips of every man, woman, and child whose ancestors suffered for centuries under the yoke of martial law.

And yet that’s not at all how things stand here. “Military dictatorship” and “martial law” probably conjure up images of Suharto, Robert Mugabe, and Michael Bloomberg, but the rule of the samurai was not the typical reign of ideological terror. It is a cliché but still

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true to observe that Japanese society has traditionally placed a premium on *wa*, variously translated as “harmony,” “concord,” and “getting along well with the neighbors.” *Wa* is a very nice thing, and as a longtime resident of Japan I have come to value it highly. There is not much need for a tinpot dictator when folks tend to prioritize good order and mutual friendliness on their own. There are just as many opportunities here as anywhere to think of one’s fellowmen in a less-than-charitable way (translation: Japan, too, has dolts and ingrates), but people in Japan are usually very good about putting the long-term *wa* of the community above the fleeting satisfaction of insisting on having things all one’s own way. Freedom is just not a big factor in the day-to-day social equation.

In fact, “freedom” has traditionally had a somewhat negative connotation in Japan. The word *jiyū*, which is used to translate “freedom” was coined only as the military dictatorship was crumbling in the latter third of the nineteenth century and Western tracts on liberalism and liberty were beginning to be widely studied in Japan. *Jiyū* is a very common word today, but if one squints and looks at it with a pinch of historically grounded skepticism it begins to seem quite odd. “Doing whatever you want” is a rough literal translation of *jiyū*—not at all the ideal in a country where a much older and more common expression goes, “the nail that sticks up gets hammered down.” Far from being an absolute condition of human life, “freedom” in Japan has almost always been, not even an anomaly, but simply off the radar. Duty and honor have traditionally been valued, and “doing whatever you want” was not really anyone’s ideal.

For all these reasons it is a surprise that Watanabe Yasushi’s fine introduction to libertarianism—a phrase which is translated even more provocatively as “ultra-do-whatever-you-want-ism” (*jiyūshijōshugi*)—has turned out to be one of this year’s steady sellers. Watanabe completed his PhD at Harvard and is a highly respected interpreter of all things American for highbrow Japanese readers. Watanabe also writes regularly for *Chūō Kōron*, a prestigious big-ideas journal with a storied history in Japan. So, the author’s sterling reputation as a public intellectual surely does not hurt his new book’s numbers on Amazon. But it still takes one aback to find that there is such a big reception to libertarian ideas here.

Perhaps this should not be so surprising, however. In a discussion I had with Watanabe earlier this spring, he told me that the book had found a big audience mainly among Japanese young people. Aha. Now it was starting to make sense. The Japanese economy has been circling the Keynesian drain for more than twenty years, and politicians have tried and tried the only Keynesian method available for plugging a hole: pumping more water into the tub. Needless to say, this has not worked. Young people enter an economy badly bruised by political-economical hijinks and worry that their future is not as bright, the way forward not as secure, as were the prospects which greeted their parents and grandparents a generation or two ago. Libertarianism makes broad sense to those who will now have to pick up the pieces after Keynesianism's bone mauling of the Japanese economy. In a system that is transparently rigged to benefit the politically connected, "ultra-do-whatever-you-want-ism" does not sound half bad at all.

There is something else, too, one suspects, which may be keeping Watanabe's latest book on the shelves here. Before the election of Donald Trump—indeed, right up until the hour of his victory over the Faerie Queene of Keynesianism herself—the Japanese press and soi-disant intelligentsia tended to know virtually nothing about America beyond what they could find in the *New York Times*. The news about my homeland here was pretty thin gruel, long on Washington process and Wall Street speculation but very, very short on the genetic makeup of the American mind: namely liberty. After Donald Trump won the White House, sober journalists (yes, they still have those here—eat your heart out, CNN) began searching for the real America, and honest intellectuals started venturing beyond the East and West Coast elitist enclaves to find out what the rest of the country had to say. Libertarianism has been part of America since before the beginning, and anyone who knows America knows, if not Lysander Spooner, then at least Ted Nugent. But this giant swath of Americana has completely passed the Tokyoite America hands by.

Not Watanabe, though. He has long been a thinker of great integrity and an above-board observer of the US, and all of this made him a perfect candidate to research and report on libertarianism in America. His new book is a model of fairness and in-depth investigation. He visited the various headquarters of libertarianism

in the States, including the Mises Institute, and interviewed people working there. There are many misconceptions about libertarianism, both in the US and in Japan, but Watanabe has done his level best to dispel them. For example, he allows Jeff Deist and Mark Thornton to have their own say about what the Mises Institute is and what it does. He also counters the pernicious lies of the Southern Poverty Law Center about “white supremacy” and various other slanders against libertarians in general. Watanabe is an intellectual historian of the first rank and is the ideal person to introduce libertarianism to a country that has not heard much that is good about it in the mainstream press (I refer, of course, to the United States, but I hope Watanabe meets with much success in Japan, too).

As far as Japan goes, perhaps Watanabe’s book will contribute to a revitalization of the Japanese economy and to a rebirth of the country’s vibrant innovative potential and creative thinking. In a strange way, studying libertarianism may also help historians to rethink the Japanese past. The fact that there was no word for freedom in Japan may mean that there was no concept of it—or it could mean that the concept was so embedded that there was no need to make it explicit. After all, whatever the word for freedom might be, everybody wants to be his own man. This is particularly apparent in Japanese aesthetics. The arts and artisans of Japan have *always* displayed the kind of new-and-old blending that make Japan great in so many ways, both culturally and commercially. An aspiring painter or tea ceremony practitioner might spend decades apprenticed to a master, but when the time is right, voilà, a masterpiece all his own. Likewise, pottery from the Jōmon period may be more than ten thousand years old, but it still conveys a sense of dedicated application of artistic genius and human whimsy that merges perfectly with whatever is coming out of the design studios of the top Japanese firms today. Maybe the Japanese have always been libertarians but just did not know it. Maybe freedom is in the DNA here, too. Indeed, seen in another light, *wa* implies freedom, presupposes it. (Why go to all the trouble of emphasizing harmony if it comes naturally anyway?) In discovering libertarianism, Japanese young people may be surprised to find that they are rediscovering their own country’s deepest traditions in a new way.

For the time being, the United States remains the world capital of libertarianism, and Yasushi Watanabe’s book on this very

Western-toned subject is the absolute must-read first step toward what will hopefully be a long and beautiful friendship between East and West.