

## Japan and the World: As Seen from the Mountains of Kobe University

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Hello everyone. It's a great pleasure to be back at Kobe University and speaking to you all today.

I think it's usually the case when you look back at your university career to talk a little about the teachers that inspired you and the important things you learned while you were here. But I'd like to also take a slightly different approach and let you know why I think Kobe University is a unique place in the whole of Japan, indeed possibly the whole of the world, and how my experience here has shaped my attitudes for the rest of my life. I'm going to build up to a big climax, but before we get there, I'm going to tell you about how I went from being completely indifferent to Kobe University to deeply treasuring this place in my heart.

Originally, I never wanted to come to Kobe or Kobe University - a university I had indeed never heard of. When I was 23 years old in 1992 and applied to come as a graduate student to study Japanese literature on a Monbusho scholarship in Japan, I was very clear where I wanted to study - and it was not here. I wanted to be in Kyoto, the home of ancient Japanese culture, and study at Kyoto University, with its views of Hiei-zan and Higashiyama, next to the philosopher's walk and a stone's throw from the Temple of the Silver Pavilion. I had a girlfriend at the time at Kyoto University and I wanted to be part of that world.

So imagine my disappointment when being informed that I had been selected to go not to that ancient, distinctively Japanese city of Kyoto, but to the heavily Westernized city of Kobe instead. The reason was apparently that there was no one at Kyoto University teaching the particular area - Meiji period Japanese literature - that I wanted to study, so I was sent over

to Kobe University.

Compounding that disappointment, the place where I would be living was the dormitory on Port Island, kept exclusively for foreigners, and surrounded by modern housing blocks. I had wanted to plunge deep into Japanese culture and fuse my identity perfectly with Japan, but instead I was living with a bunch of foreigners on a man-made island with no history or culture it all. I felt like one of the Dutch merchants living in a concession on the island of Dejima in Nagasaki during the Edo Period, not allowed to set foot on Japan proper.

When I hauled up the high hill to Kobe University itself, I was also in for a shock. I was told this was supposed to be one of the best universities in Japan, but the buildings appeared to be old and falling down. I was already vaguely aware of the paradox of the university world in Japan - that the better a university is, the more rough around the edges the facilities are, but if that was the case then Kobe University was surely be one of the best universities in the country. Everywhere seemed to be stone floors - there were no carpets - and single glazing, and the only heating in the winter months seemed to come from portable gas stoves. The desks, chairs, bookshelves and lighting were all basic. It was a dishevelled, Spartan place.

I was directed to the room of my supervisor, Professor Rinbara, who lived in a room that was entirely engulfed in books. When you opened the door of the room, a bookcase faced you and you had to slide your way round it to get inside. There, books were piled randomly everywhere and there was just about space somewhere in the middle to sit down. Facing me was the figure of Professor Rinbara himself, a kind-hearted, chain-smoking man in his late 40s, with a wispy beard and spectacles attached to his face by string.

Although I had been specifically sent to Kobe University to study under Professor Rinbara, he had no particular interest in the writer - the famous Meiji era author Natsume Soseki - on whom I wished to devote my time, and

I in turn had some difficulty in grasping what were the areas of interest that most animated him. He gave classes on what seemed to me at the time to be enormously obscure subjects - such as early Meiji period political novels which you could not even read in typeset print, but had to be fathomed in handwritten form, which I couldn't read at all. Professor Rinbara seemed to study things that no one else had studied before.

There were two other major presences in the faculty of literature that I would soon begin to closely observe. One was Professor Fujiwara, who was a young fellow with floppy hair, whose speciality was Heian period literature. I seem to recall that Professor Fujiwara's ambition was to write a great thesis about the concept of love in the Tale of Genji - I'm not sure if he ever realized it - but his lectures could develop in all types of surprising directions. At one, I seem to recall him suddenly bursting into song by singing in German one of Schubert's lieder.

The great star of the faculty however was Professor Takehiko Noguchi, a man who had written dozens of books on literary subjects from the Heian period to the present day, and who was described to me as being "close to genius". He was certainly treated as such. With a dumpling haircut and a thin body with elongated fingers, he had the air of a slightly riotous monk - he was famous for his great drinking ability in years gone by. But by the time I arrived at Kobe University, it seemed he had damaged his liver and now all his wild drinking was in the past - it was a great cause of regret to me that I never witnessed, or participated in, the riotous drinking I heard so much about it.

Sadly, I never entirely bonded with or fully appreciated Professor Noguchi while I was at Kobe University, which I consider a missed opportunity. It was only after I left that I finally got round to reading some of his books and appreciating how wide-ranging and original his mind was. Used as I was to seeing him lecture on Edo period Japanese literature, I cringe now to think of my asking him at one time whether he could read books in English - he

modestly said he could - and discovering later that he had actually published, amongst his many publications, a Japanese translation of a biography of Yukio Mishima by the American critic John Nathan.

Professor Noguchi went out of his way to make a connection with me - one time he presented me with a new book on Natsume Soseki as a gift, and another time he entered the run-down graduate student common room and sat down in a chair there to talk to me. Another graduate student witnessing this scene remarked that it was a “very rare” sight.

But still, the things I was really most interested in - subjects like the interconnection of visual art and literature, or the influence of Nietzsche on Japanese literature, or the connections between William Shakespeare and Soseki - I tended to just read up on my own. When I occasionally produced papers on these subjects, the professors had a hard time assessing them as they were so different from their own interests.

I seemed to enjoy privileged treatment at Kobe University as I observed that while all the other male graduate students were referred to as “kun”, I alone was politely referred to with the suffix “san”. But it took me quite a time to come to terms with the university culture - I was always amazed to witness the sight of students casually sleeping in seminars without being chided by the professor in charge.

One time, Professor Rinbara fearing that I was rather isolated in Kobe, took me aside at the Professors’ Reception Building and while pouring me glasses of beer as we took in the fine views of Osaka Bay, suggested that I consider moving to Tokyo. There were so many more, eminent scholars of Natsume Soseki there that I could mix with and share ideas, he suggested.

But I had no intention of ever moving to Tokyo, indeed I had no intention of ever going to Tokyo at all for a very clear reason: I had a considerable fear of earthquakes and everyone knew that a great earthquake - the Big One - in

the Tokyo area was long overdue. In contrast, everyone knew that earthquakes never took place in Kobe, which was completely safe. This was in 1994, the year before the Great Hanshin Earthquake.

Three months before the earthquake I finally moved out of the dormitory on Port Island and rented a basic apartment - known as “bunka jutaku” - in the Rokko area, a place from which I was able to easily walk up the hill every day. It was quite stressful moving my stuff and furnishing it, but at last I felt I had blended into proper Japanese society at last.

And then, out of nowhere, the earthquake struck...

Luckily, the fragile wooden, two-storey building did not collapse and was only “half-destroyed”, meaning that it was filled with cracks and its doorways skewed. With nowhere to live and Kobe in chaos, I had to flee to Yamashina, near Kyoto, and enter a homestay for a while. Then, ironically, I moved back to the dormitory on Port Island for another year, before moving to a flat in Koshienguchi.

It's a strange thing to say, but living in Kobe during the earthquake and the years immediately following it, changed everything. Previously I had tended to think - please forgive me - of Kobe as a slightly boring place, but now as the city struggled to recover from the disaster, it became quite an exciting place to live. I also began to feel much closer kinship towards Kobe and Kobe University - we had all experienced this huge disaster together, days we would never forget.

The earthquake happened in January, and at first it seemed as if everything at Kobe University would be suspended for a while. In Kobe, there were thousands of dead, and hundreds of thousands of refugees. Kobe was full of collapsed buildings, with a great smell of dust in the air. There was a period when you could not even travel from Kobe to Osaka by train. But soon Kobe University began to display what I can only describe as “Blitz spirit” and

quickly began to carry on regardless. The month after the earthquake I sat in a hall here to take the entrance exam for the Masters course in Japanese literature: it was February, bitterly cold and there was no heating whatsoever. Everyone taking the exam had to wear heavy winter coats to keep warm.

Yet my love for Kobe University and the city of Kobe were steadily growing. I was an unconventional student. Although I loved reading books during the week, the constant immersion in Japanese and academia slightly exhausted me and I did little socialising with the other students. Instead I had a double life where at the weekends I would explore the warren of bars in the Shinsaibashi and Nanba areas of Osaka, another city that I once treated with disinterest but grew to deeply love.

I eventually ended up writing my PhD thesis at an Internet cafe in the Uehonmachi area of Osaka - a place frequented by hostesses and tourists, businessmen and bar workers. In the final days of the 6.5 years I spent at Kobe University, I would come into the University rarely, perhaps only once a week. During the time I had studied here, I had travelled all over Japan and indeed travelled all over the world. Yet I felt a very special love for this place, even if I wasn't quite sure why.

After graduating in 2000, I never came back to Kobe University until the Homecoming Day two years ago, when I attended in the morning the ceremony in the hall at the upper part of the campus, a hall I had never entered before. I was most interested by the huge murals there, showing a gathering of heroic figures on mountainsides. I'm not sure exactly what they represent but what they connected to in my mind was that classic of Chinese literature, "The Water Margin", in which the rebels against a corrupt government gather at the very edge of the kingdom. Removed from the corruptions at the centre, they can see the world with new clarity.

And then it began to slowly formulate in my mind what exactly it is that makes Kobe University so unique and precious. There is a tendency to think of Kobe University as just one of many excellent universities in Japan. But no, I clearly wish to tell you, we are different from the rest. The chief characteristic of Kobe University is its extraordinary location, up here in the high hills, looking out at the vast vistas of the cities of Kobe and Osaka bay unfurling before us. We are at a remove from the rest of the world and we have a perspective that no one else has.

I began to see that the qualities of independence and originality of thought that I have taken with me through life were deeply fostered here at Kobe University. In everything I have published since leaving here - books on Natsume Soseki and Yukio Mishima for example - I have tried to present completely different understandings of things to those presented by anyone else, particularly the crowd in Tokyo. I'm not interested in following whatever the latest academic trends and obsessions are: I want to present perspectives that no one has seen before. Currently I write a column for the Mainichi Shinbun, "Edging Toward Japan", that attempts to see the whole of Japanese culture from unexpected and fresh perspectives.

But I don't just want to think academically in an unconventional, individualistic way - I want to live that way too. I refuse to accept the idea that intellectuals need to stay confined within universities to develop their ideas. Since leaving Kobe University I've not only published books and articles, but I have developed a business in England and write as much about business and real estate as I do about literature. I'm also politically active because I think the complete person is someone who doesn't just think independently and creates wealth, but also acts. One of the great truths I have discovered in life - a truth which is rarely taught - is that all these activities of literature, business and politics profoundly interconnect. All you need is the ability to break out of a narrow view of things and see the wide vista of life unfurling before you.

How lucky I feel now that I was not to study at Kyoto University, where I would have been burdened by the pressure of the past. Or in Tokyo, I would have mixed in with circles all jostling with one another in competition for prominence, all chattering about the same ideas. Or else, being lost in the provinces, I would have never known the cosmopolitanism, the sophistication of this entry point to the wider world that both Kobe and Kobe University have always been.

The ability to think differently, to offer radically and fearlessly fresh ideas, are for me the most important qualities you can develop as a critic. You must never fall into the trap of believing that your thinking in some way represents your nation - I do not stand before you today as an Englishman, and I am certainly not representative of Britain. Rather, I am an individual and I am interacting in individualistic, unpredictable ways with the culture of Japan - a nation which is far from uniform but radically different, depending on what aspects of it you engage with.

To me this distinctive, maverick aspect of Kobe University is a quality which should be much more recognised and promoted.

You know, two years ago, after I attended the ceremony in the Law Faculty, I descended back down to the Literature Faculty and was slightly shocked by what I discovered. The old building which I knew from my arrival in 1993 had been completely demolished and a much more comfortable building with an entirely new configuration erected in its place. These days the students and professors seem to have much more luxurious facilities compared to the old days.

None of the teachers who taught me when I was here in the 1990s are still here, and the site has been so completely redeveloped that I have to rely on my memory to tell me what it once was like.



It's interesting comparing this to the experience of my college at Cambridge in England where I spent 4 years as an undergraduate before coming to Kobe University. That college - originally founded in the 16th century - looks almost exactly the same now as it did when I left it in 1992 and indeed some of the teaching staff from my time are still there (perhaps they have been teaching for 500 years). If I close my eyes when I am there, I almost feel as if I can re-open them and find myself in a 22-year-old's clothes back in 1992 once more.

I wasn't particularly happy for some of the time when I was at Cambridge, yet I never let more than 2 years pass without going back for some dinner or social event, and I have spent many wonderful evenings there over the last 25 years. The first time I returned to Cambridge after graduating, I can remember rather sheepishly entering the University library, enquiring if it was alright as I had already graduated.

The attendant looked at me and proclaimed, "Once a member of the University, sir, \*always\* a member."

Those words, promoting a lifelong bond with Cambridge University, have never left me. That is the bond I also wish to feel with Kobe University.

In contrast to Cambridge, the years I spent at Kobe University were some of the happiest and most stimulating of my life, and yet this is only the second time that I have been back since I left. I'm extremely happy that we have events like the Homecoming Day that remind us that the tie we have with Kobe University is not a temporary, but a lifetime bond. Yet I would like to see much stronger alumni ties and a greater sense of Kobe University itself around the world.

If asked for example about the history of the college I attended at Cambridge, or the famous people who went there, I could spend a long time giving you an answer, not to mention the hours I could talk about the wider university and

its alumni such as Issac Newton or Charles Darwin. Yet I must confess that I know nothing about the general history of Kobe University and the famous people who studied here even though I am sure there are a great many of them. We need to do much more to promote this sense of heritage and to make sure that everyone who comes here knows the unique personality of the institution they are attending.

I often see absurd charts of world rankings of universities that places somewhere like Kobe University at 395 and Cambridge University number 1 in the world, yet in my mind - and certainly my affections - these two places are equal.

International students should never feel that they are coming to Kobe University to simply experience Japanese culture. You may do that anywhere in Japan. Kobe University offers something infinitely more precious - a space to think creatively and independently, surrounded by the stimuli of some brilliant minds.

Nowhere else in Japan breathes the air as freely or has vistas so complete and commanding as Kobe University. What students acquire here is a mindset for engaging creatively with the world that will stay with them for life, no matter what part of the world their wanderings take them.

That is why I am supremely proud to be a member of this fabulous university and why I encourage you - my fellow intellectual rebels of the Water Margins, up here in Rokko Mountain raising the flags of rebellion - to never forget the uniquely proud, free-thinking elite you belong to.

Thank you for listening to me today.