Open Thread and a Few Observations on Japan

I am putting this post up to give commenters who would like to carry on conversations related to previous posts a place to comment, since comments on my last post have been cut off.

Also, my family and I recently returned from a two-week vacation to Japan. The combination of the time away and jet lag has given me less time to research and write a full article. Here are a few observations, based on my recent trip to Japan:

General

The scenery is beautiful, but it is clear that the Japanese people and agriculture are squeezed into the small amount of land that is not mountainous and forested.

The amount of land being used for agriculture has been steadily falling. Our tour guide remarked that if an older person wanted to leave agriculture, getting solar panels installed is an alternate way of obtaining income. We did see quite a few solar panels. But does this approach make sense, when the amount of land farmed is...
relatively small and falling year-by-year? The USDA says, “Based on total calories consumed, Japan imports about 60 percent of its food each year.”

**Tokyo-Edo Museum Visit**

When we first arrived in Tokyo, before our bus tour began, we visited the Tokyo-Edo museum. This is a photo of one of the exhibits from the museum.

![Tokyo-Edo Museum Exhibit](https://example.com/tokyo-edo-museum.jpg)

In previous posts, I have talked about economies being dissipative structures—growing for a fairly long period, before collapsing or obtaining an infusion of cheap energy. I thought that it was interesting that the Edo Period lasted 265 years (1603 – 1868). This is about as long as a person might expect an economy to last in its role as a dissipative structure. In the latter part of the Edo Period, there seemed to be increasing wealth disparity and problems with the government collecting enough taxes. These are things that we would expect to happen, as resources per capita start to fall and complexity starts to increase.

**Free English Language Guided Tour of Museum**

The three of us (my husband, son, and I) received a free three-hour English language guided tour from a volunteer guide at the Tokyo-Edo Museum. The guide told us that he is a 75-year old retired business man. There was no charge for his services; we were also told not to tip people in Japan.

My impression is that the no-tipping policy is a holdover from the gift economy approach that much of the world used before our current capitalist approach took over. Under the gift economy approach, people are
expected to offer their services for nothing, with the expectation that others will reciprocate. This system has pluses and minuses. If pensions of some elderly people are inadequate, it makes it harder for them to provide personal services for wages, since others (with more adequate pensions) will do the same thing for free, as unpaid volunteers.

**Traveling School Children**

Everywhere we traveled, we encountered a large number of school children traveling on school trips. They often stayed at the same hotels as we did and visited the same sites as we did. In fact, in several places they seemed to be the majority of hotel guests.
The group of children shown above had prepared some type of recitation and response to be offered in the Hiroshima Peace Park. The group is lined up for their presentation, even though there was no real audience for their performance, other than a few of us from our tour bus who happened to be walking by. I can’t imagine US children doing this.

Our tour leader told us that only children whose parents can afford to pay for these class trips are allowed to go. As a result, there is a great deal of pressure on parents to save up money for these trips.

**Roads in Japan**

The roads in Japan impressed me as being incredibly expensive to build and maintain. Everywhere, we saw walls built along the side of the road, presumably to prevent falling rock. In the US, we just put up signs, “Beware of Falling [really fallen] Rock.” Of course, we have more space, so we don’t build our roads quite so close to the road cuts.

The white line near the side of the road is to mark off what I would call a “sidewalk substitute.” It is a low-cost way of giving pedestrians a little space to walk.

We saw other features that make roads expensive. Our tour bus drove through countless tunnels. We also drove on many sections where the road was elevated, so that more roads could be squeezed into less area.
Nearly everywhere, soundproofing panels have been added because roads are so close to buildings. Roads are being made in an earthquake-proof manner, which also adds to costs.

Our bus frequently drove through toll stations. Wikipedia indicates that most expressways were originally financed by debt, and the tolls are being collected to pay off this debt. The Japan Guide indicates to drive the length of Japan, toll payments of 39,000 yen ($349) are required for a private passenger automobile. This is expensive compared to tolls elsewhere.

**Man Made Rocks**
Something else I noticed in Japan that I hadn’t seen elsewhere was the use of man-made rocks. Here, they are being used to keep the sea from causing erosion under a major road that is very close to the edge of the sea. We saw other shapes of rocks being used for other purposes elsewhere.

![Man-made rocks along a road in Japan](image)

**Government Pensions in Japan**

The [National Pension program in Japan](https://ourfiniteworld.com) (somewhat equivalent to our Social Security) is based on the assumption that all participants in the program will make equal contributions to the program, regardless of income. In 2017, these contributions amount to 16,490 yen (or $147) per month. To get the maximum pension amount, a person has to contribute at the full level (whatever it is declared to be, each year) for 40 years.

Our bus tour guide told us that because of changing employers and resulting low income, he has been unable to make contributions in recent years. When he retires, he expects that his pension payments will be very low because of this. He seemed to be well educated and hardworking. If he is having pension problems, I expect that many others are also having pension problems. In fact, some may be having pension problems today. We saw quite a few older people working.
Bullet Trains in Japan

One thing we discovered is that Japan’s bullet trains are for people, not luggage. The racks over people’s heads hold a backpack or brief case, but not much more. If people have luggage, they generally send it a day or two ahead of time via a luggage transfer service. There is also no internet service available on these bullet trains.
We chose to take an airplane from Osaka to Tokyo. Airplanes will transfer both people and luggage.

**Photo in Kotohira, Japan**

This is a photo of my husband, son, and me, after we had climbed 865 steps to a shrine in Kotohira, Japan. We had a good but tiring trip.
In any discussion of the oil market it is all too easy to ignore the real world consequences of the price fall that has occurred over the last three years... That is short-sighted because the structural shift that has taken place is profoundly destabilising and potentially very dangerous.

“A new note from the Energy Information Administration in the US published last month sets out the impact of the fall in prices in recent years. It is worth summarising the data, which are expressed in real 2016 dollars.

“These are big numbers for all the countries involved. Very few have diverse economies that can adjust quickly to the fall in the price of a crucial export commodity. Most have large dependent populations, especially of children and young people. Nigeria, for instance, has some 115m people, amounting to 61 per cent of its population, under the age of 25; Angola 13m — 63 per cent of its population...

The price fall has reduced the revenue of the Opec states by some $750m from the 2012 level — a fall of over 60 per cent. None have fully adapted to that loss of income. Most have assumed that the price change would be temporary and some have