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Introduction: reorienting hopes

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[H]ope is the feeling that time is not closed to us. (Jackson 2011: xii)

[W]hen social citizenship or horizons of expectation are blocked, hopelessness sets in, as it has for many today. (Allison 2013: 62)

1 Tracing the work of hope

In recent years, amid a faltering economic climate, Japanese people have witnessed a proliferation of narratives of decline and diminishing hope. The social consequences of the economic downturn are various, ranging from withdrawal from the public sphere and political apathy among the young, to the strengthening of revisionism and right-wing rhetoric. By far the most widespread public reaction, however, seems to be a sense of disillusionment and hopelessness. Yet while the economic and social situation does indeed warrant concern, the broad and comparative perspective afforded by anthropology would indicate that people continue to hope and strive for better lives, no matter how dire the circumstances (e.g., Robbins 2013; Kavedžija and Walker 2015). In this issue, contributors consider feelings, perceptions, and narratives of hope and hopelessness in Japan: tracing, as it were, the work of hope.

Hope (kibō) in this context can be understood as at once a disposition, a tool, and a collective resource. People may actively seek out or attempt to foster hope; but hope is also, at times, felt as external: bestowed upon some and not others. That is to say, hope can be situational.¹ Both fostered hope and situational hope can have an impact on people’s actions, but it is the latter that

¹ Reed (2011) wrote of prisoners on remand, who unlike the convicts who were just waiting out the duration of their sentence had hope – in this case hope was seen as arising from the very nature of their situation.

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highlights the significance of the “independent action of hope in the world” (Reed 2011: 533). The contributions to this issue, in this sense, enlarge our understanding of what hope does. Engagement with hope problematizes the question of agency, complicating the relationship between what people do and the circumstances that constrain them, conditioning their responses or even animating them. In this way, the volume answers a call made forcefully by Henrietta Moore for an approach to culture that reads it forward, in a way that seeks to “take account of people’s own projects of self-making, including their desire to transform the conditions that make them” (Moore 2011: 15).

Undoubtedly, the articles in this issue can by no means offer a full and coherent picture of “hope” and the myriad ways it is absent and present in contemporary Japanese society. What they do offer is detailed description of selected cases: it is in this sense that ethnography is invoked, as an endeavour to build insight from the bottom up, by focusing on a specific setting or a group of people and attempting a “thick description,” rather than by relying on statistical data, using samples that purport to be representative, or starting with existing theory. The contributions to this issue make us aware of the expanses still to be covered if the work of hope is to be comprehensively mapped in contemporary Japanese society, and they offer some directions for such explorations to take.

2 Hopelessness and hope in Japan

In his bestselling novel Kibō no kuni no ekusodasu (‘The exodus of a country of hope’), novelist Ryu Murakami (2000) suggested that in contrast to the post-war years, when people felt hopeful amid hardship and scarcity, hope is now one thing that people in Japan do not have. Written in the years of economic boom, the book proposed that hope drained away along with a sense of common purpose, as people became engrossed in material pursuits, and increasingly atomized. Writing about the post-war years, Michio Nitta (2009: 177–188), a scholar of labour relations, argued that a lack of hope should not be confused with a sense of insecurity or uncertainty. The loss of hope is characterized by a lack of clarity in defining one’s problem, and further associated with a lack of clear aims or goals. In a society without hope, in other words, it is difficult to point to a specific problem that needs addressing, and therefore to formulate goals or aims – and so without hope it is difficult to take action to change the situation. This point, I believe, is more refined than simply claiming that hopelessness leads to a sense of immobility and loss of motivation (cf. Lueck
it has to do with a loss of a sense of specificity. A problem-solving attitude requires problem definition, while hopelessness appears more diffuse.

Taken together, the suggestions by Murakami and Nitta highlight the complex relationship between hope and a sense of purpose in a societal context: without clear aims and a sense of a common commitment, hope is easily lost; when hope disappears, the underlying problem is difficult to define, and goals for change and a sense of purpose are bound to be elusive.

If hope was elusive or scarce in the years of economic prosperity, how has the situation changed thereafter? One opinion is that the ensuing period of prolonged economic recession and the social and demographic changes that followed made hope in Japanese society even more difficult to maintain: “[…] Japan is becoming an impoverished country. A society where hope has turned scarce and the future has become bleak or inconceivable altogether” (Allison 2013: 6–7). The lack of job security among a growing portion of the population, as described by Allison, could be added to population aging and an increasing sense of social isolation and loneliness, both of which have been described as key factors contributing to the spread of a feeling of loss of hope (Genda 2008). The contributions to this special issue touch on all three of these main factors: aging and longevity (Danely); socially marginalized groups (Hack); and difficult work conditions set against the backdrop of ever larger numbers of unemployed (North and Morioka).

The apparent increase in hopelessness incited a group of scholars at the University of Tokyo to establish a programme of Hope Studies (kibōgaku), which has so far resulted in several well-received volumes, including a series of four books edited by Yuji Genda and Shigeki Uno. Departing from a definition of hope as a “wish for something to come true” through action (Swedberg 2007, cited in Genda 2006), these authors attempted to found Hope Studies as a new field of enquiry based on empirical research. Some of their material, which draws on three nationwide surveys (Genda 2006, Genda 2008), suggests that contrary to their expectations, over three-quarters of respondents reported having hope, and even more considered hopefulness to be very important. Those who did not have hope were likely to have bleak views of the society they live in, or their position in it. In their attempt to elucidate the differences between those with hope and those without, Genda and his collaborators noted three important tendencies. Firstly, those who reported having hope tended to have more choices for action, due to circumstances such as health, youth, and a better educational and financial situation, while hope was most likely to elude older people, those with health problems, or the unemployed. Secondly, those who felt more hopeful had more friends and stronger interpersonal relationships with non-kin, while those who were socially isolated were most likely to
be affected by loss of hope. Thirdly, those whose families had higher expectations regarding their life-course tended, on the whole, to feel more hopeful.

Another remarkable characteristic to emerge from Hope Studies, concerning those who reported having hope, was that the majority were not overly concerned about having to achieve all they hoped for, and instead allowed for the possibility of failures, which could in turn be seen retrospectively as challenges to be overcome. In this sense, hope differs markedly from a simple expectation, as it incorporates an assumption of success. Those who, seeking to avoid disappointment, dare not hope for an improvement in their lot, might not take any action that allows them to influence their circumstances. If a cynic might see those who hope as naïve or foolhardy, hope in challenging circumstances can, in fact, be seen as brave.

In either case, Genda’s empirical observation in the Japanese context resonates powerfully with a theoretical point developed by anthropologist Hirokazu Miyazaki in his work in Fiji: “The method of hope […] is predicated on the inheritance of a past hope and its performative replication in the present” (Miyazaki 2004: 139). In Miyazaki’s book, hope is not a subject of investigation, but a method which involves a replication of emergence of hopeful moments, as they took shape during his fieldwork. The Suvavou people’s claims to their land, based on their knowledge of themselves and of their past, repeatedly met with failure. While receipt of compensation for their land would offer an important confirmation of their knowledge, the long-term failure posed a challenge. In this context, Miyazaki’s account is focused on a single question: “How have Suvavou people kept their hope alive for generation after generation when their knowledge has continued to fail them?” For Suvavou then, hope is a “method for self-knowledge” – hope is open-ended and thus makes possible the pursuit of self-knowledge, allowing for challenges and yet preserving something of the sense of self. This kind of hope, according to Miyazaki (2004: 5), takes shape as a “reorientation of knowledge,” including a temporal reorientation towards the future.

An understanding of hope as a reorientation of knowledge, inspired by Miyazaki’s formulation, lies at the heart of several contributions to this special issue. Undoubtedly, it is inflected differently by each author, depending on the material presented; nonetheless, the focus on a shift in perspective, a reinterpretation or reorientation, emerges as a central feature of attempts to recapture hope within challenging social circumstances in contemporary Japan. The ethnographic examples in this volume show that hope can usefully be seen as an attitude which encapsulates elements of continuity and discontinuity: the possibility for something different embedded in the present moment, a seed of something that qualitatively differs from the present. In other words, hope al-
lows for the imagination and emergence of a situation other than that which
would be a continuation of the circumstances in which we find ourselves, or
what Ernst Bloch (1995 [1986]) refers to as the “not-yet.” By reorienting or shift-
ing our gaze, perhaps we can see something different in the “same old”? This
entwinement of continuity and discontinuity holds a promise, a possibility that
things will work out.

3 Ethnographies of hope

In the first contribution to this collection, Jason Danely evaluates the relation-
ship between longevity and hope in Japan, focusing on individual hopes under
the conditions of bodily decline, and touching upon the broader societal issues
related to the increasing strain on the economy as society ages. Danely frames
hope in terms of a search for meaningful potential, and poses an important
question: what is the place of hope for people approaching the end of their
lives? Rather than merely waiting for the inevitable, with their hopes and
dreams curtailed, older Kyotoites engage in ritual practices involving family
altars which bring them closer to the ancestors, to the spirits of the departed
(hotoke). Family rites of memorialization, most often performed by older peo-
ples, aim to link past, present and future generations, and to allow for the cycli-
cal renewal of the family, providing a source of hope to older people. These
ritual practices allow for a refocusing of loss towards a different sense of tempo-
rality, beyond a linear life course and towards a life-cycle perspective, affording
a link both with ancestors and with the generations to come. This kind of tran-
scendence allows for a different understanding of the self and fosters a feeling
of hope. Such a temporality, of a cyclical kind, allows Danely to describe this
transcendent hope as kind of “lunar temporality,” akin to the phases of the
moon. Finally, Danely argues that loss, figured as transience and related tran-
scendence, poses a limit to the dreams and aspirations of older people, but
also forms the basis for a transformation of expectations, a “narrative re-envi-
soning” as part of a larger whole, thus fostering hope.

Brett Hack, in the second contribution to this issue, discusses hopelessness
as a form of refusal – of a kind that leads some people to withdrawal or, in
recent years, leads young people to look to the right of the political spectrum
and embrace xenophobic nationalism. Hack examines the online activities of a
neo-nationalist subculture known as netto uyoku (‘net far right’), whose nation-
alist sentiments are underwritten with intense xenophobia. Their online pres-
ence is most notably defined through assertive self-definition by means of slo-
gans and the bullying of those whom they see as “un-Japanese.” While it could be argued that a reorientation towards nationalism offers a sense of participation in something larger than oneself, the online activities presented offer little sense of hopeful feelings among netto uyoku themselves – not to mention the fact that their online behaviour according to the author (personal communication) is likely to foster worry and hopelessness among those in disagreement with their beliefs. Furthermore, the netto uyoku tend to draw on the subculture of manga and anime fans or otaku, which may have led to otaku being more broadly perceived as right-wing and prone to bullying. Despite both subculture groups drawing on a common imaginary and utilizing similar online strategies, Hack argues that they should not be equated, and shows how otaku in fact resist the activities of the nationalists. Building on Miyazaki’s idea of hope as a reorientation of knowledge, he reveals how members of the otaku Internet subculture undermine the attempts of netto uyoku to hijack the Internet space, thus regaining a sense of hope.

The third contribution, by Scott North and Rika Morioka, paints a picture of a rather grim kind of hope – hope for recognition and compensation for the families of those who died from overwork (karoshi). More broadly, in terms of prevention, the workers in this context did not plead their rights with the employers, requesting an alleviation of the burden of work and fewer overtime hours or a less stressful work environment; instead, they relied on the benevolence of their employers to take their duty of care seriously. North and Morioka point out that these hopes of compensation, while undoubtedly dark, must nonetheless be recognized as hopes, of the kind that one seeks in order to get through the life one has been cast into. Such hopes make us deeply aware of the delimitations or boundaries placed on them. They raise the question, in other words, of who can hope, and what they can hope for. In a society such as Japan, not everyone can have the same hopes. We could therefore argue that the ways in which certain hopes are framed as acceptable act as a modus of control: construing hope as contingent upon the benevolence of the employers ultimately has serious consequences for the kind of working life one is able to envisage for oneself. The duty of care of the employers, on whose benevolence the workers must rely, is closely related to the sense of responsibility felt by the workers themselves – to their companies, to the employers, to their colleagues. It is this sense of responsibility that many of those driven to karoshi or karoshi suicide felt so strongly, driving them to this ultimate embodiment of hopelessness.

In the fourth contribution, Ieva Puzo explores methods used by young foreign scientists to make sense of their mobility (as well as its loss) and to confront the uncertainties that plague their career path. In fact, the hopes underly-
ing the movement of foreign scientists to Japan are twofold, comprising the hopes held by the government for scientific solutions to social problems (and the potential of foreign scientists to help make this happen), and the hopes of the young scientists themselves. Puzo suggests that hope can be seen as constitutive of a mobility imaginary, and as such inevitably conflicted. In this imaginary, mobility figures as hopeful and positive for the elite migrants, but at the same time, they often feel that their circumstances forced the move upon them. What is the work of hope in this context, what does hope do? On the one hand, it allows the young scientists to look forward, to a future and possibly better life, in the midst of uncertainty. On the other, it directs them towards a particular pathway – that of mobility – within which they “enter a regime of a virtual shortage of labor.” Hope is not always positive, then, and like desires and expectations, is not immune to manipulation, or free from the effects of power relations.

In the final contribution to this volume, Stephen Robertson discusses contemporary Shinto oracular practices. Describing in detail a New Year gruel divination ritual at Suwa Taisha in Nagano prefecture, the article opens with a discussion of the oracle for 2011, before the disaster of Great East Japan Earthquake, which featured a warning not to “be swept off our feet.” Drawing on Jarret Zigon’s work on the ethics of hope, Robertson proposes a consideration of the oracle with regard to hope understood as a method to sustain daily efforts – in the sense of both an attitude of perseverance, and the actions required to foster it. In this rendering, hope incorporates passive and active elements: it relies on circumstances and forces larger than oneself for its fulfilment, as well as on the actions that may bring such fulfilment about. Building on this insight and on the material provided, Robertson offers an understanding of hope as sustaining effort. In this sense, the oracle encourages hope, even in the face of overwhelming challenge and adversity: “to continue striving, and in that striving find hope.” This kind of hope should be sustained, sparing no effort, and in turn will sustain efforts to carry on with life, and even to make things better.

4 Circulation of hope

Hope, as the anthropological literature shows, can emerge even in the most challenging conditions, allowing people to envisage circumstances and futures distinct from the present. How, then, did such a lack of hope, or such narratives of hopelessness, come to be so prevalent in Japan? One answer might have to
do with the definition of hope itself, and the form that particular hopes have in contemporary Japanese society.

If hope is vital for human flourishing, then a lack of hope, or “hopelessness,” cannot be described in positive terms; it must be a negative phenomenon. At the same time, hope itself is not always positive, for certain kinds of hope may prevent us from thriving: they might set us up for disappointment, or foreclose the ability to imagine an alternative future, one that might be better for us. Those hopes related to mobility, migration, and career development described by Puzo in this volume, for instance, sometimes create a tension with other aspects of young scientists’ lives, perhaps making them less happy. Moreover, the hope cultivated by the government for scientific solutions to the social problems faced by Japanese society could be seen as a form of techno optimism, and one that may all too easily be disappointed or frustrated. It is, in other words, a “cruel hope,” much like the “cruel optimism” described by Lauren Berlant (2011: 21) as a “condition of maintaining an attachment to a problematic object in advance of its loss.” If hope can be negative, manipulated, or simply “cruel,” how is one to hope well?

The philosopher Luc Bovens (1999: 681) has suggested that “[w]hat is needed to hope well is (i) a sense of groundedness not to fall prey to epistemic irrationality and (ii) a degree of frustration tolerance not to let failure drag one down.”² “Restructuring” our hopes may make them more attainable, and moreover may afford an opportunity for self-learning (as for the Suvavou people discussed by Miyazaki), as we consider what we really hope and consider possible (Bovens 1999: 676). If this is how individuals can hope well, what would it mean for a society to do so? The contributions to this volume, when read together, offer a glimpse of an answer, a step forward – but allow me to elaborate. What Bovens describes bears a resemblance to the process of shifting in self-knowledge found within Miyazaki’s idea of hope as “reorientation of knowledge.” As already noted, this potent formulation is taken up by several authors in this issue. For example, Hack uses it to show how some members of the otaku online subculture use the same tropes as online nationalists. While the latter employ them to bully others and reinforce their self-identity, otaku use these techniques and discourses to undermine them and create a sense of hope for themselves, a sense that an oppressive reality in which xenophobia thrives is not upon us yet. If hope lies in the reorientation of knowledge, how-

² These characteristics ring true in relation to the material presented by Genda, mentioned above.
ever, I would like to suggest that hope itself can be reoriented. In other words, if we cannot see a future that will sustain us, we may need to find a different way of looking. Perhaps hope itself has become an obstacle to our thriving, and must be recast: the future gaze afforded by hope reoriented. The future can thus perhaps be faced, and changed, through a reorientation of hope.

If a loss of hope is indeed spreading, it does not appear to be affecting everyone in the same way. Hope as a collective resource has been described as unevenly distributed, most notably by Masahiro Yamada (2004) in his book *Kib kakusa shakai* (‘Unequal hope society’). Yamada argues that society is increasingly polarized, divided into those who do and do not have hope. This apparently capitalist logic, which renders people into “hope haves and have-nots,” or “hope winners and losers,” causes hope to take the form of a finite resource, where everyday life is a kind of zero-sum game: in order for some to win, others must lose. To reclaim hope, I would argue that it is necessary to break free from this way of thinking. A number of examples from contemporary Japan indicate that hope is resurrected precisely in those places where the dominant logic moves away from that of the market, and towards a “logic of care,” where the more one helps others, the better off one can become. It is in just this spirit that so many volunteer efforts managed to gain momentum following the disaster in 2011 and the earlier Great Hanshin earthquake of 1995. Similar movements are observable in many aging neighbourhoods. In this sense, hope is found in shifting the perspective, in refocusing the gaze: if circumstances seem challenging and difficult or impossible to change, one might begin by looking at them differently. It is this act of seeing differently that can rekindle hope, and eventually lead to transformation.

One direction that could be singled out for such a reorientation is suggested by the contrast that emerges from the contributions to this issue, between what we might term the centripetal forces of hopelessness and the centrifugal charac-

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3 Here we are following the suggestions by Bovens, to restructure individual hopes; and by Genda, that rather than abandoning hope one should keep hoping even if it is sometimes “in vain,” while willing to adjust the hopes, redefine them.

4 If capitalism and the modes of thought it fosters have indeed become a “hopelessness generating apparatus,” as anthropologist David Graeber (2008) argues, it is also a generator of particular desires and expectations (cf. Moore 2011: 139), a “fabricator of hopes,” not all of which are necessarily furthering the wellbeing of those whom they affect. In fact, Ernst Bloch (1995 [1986]: 5) himself warned against “fraudulent hope” as “one of the greatest malefactors [...] of the human race.”

5 For a discussion of “logic of care,” albeit in a medical context, see Mol (2008).
teristics of hope. At its worst – as the example of karoshi suicides shows (North and Morioka, this volume) – the loss of hope is experienced in situations of acute isolation. The experience of hopelessness is individual, even if the consequences are social. In contrast, the kindling of hope is relational. Consider, for example, how hope is renewed through the social rituals described by Robertson (this volume), or by establishing connections with others, including members of other generations, or even ancestors, as in the case of the older people discussed by Danely (this volume). Hope opens up our horizons; when these are blocked, hopelessness is not far away, as the epigraphs to this text suggest. Much like luck, in order to thrive and spread, hope in Japan must circulate.

While I do not wish to imply that hope is entirely like luck, the comparison is not completely out of place: both hope and luck can be seen as external to the self, granted to some, but also cultivated, or at least channelled. In the Japanese context, luck (un) is construed as a kind of energy which relies on flow and sharing (Daniels 2012) – opening oneself to luck allows for it to flow, both in from the outside and out to be shared with others. When stoppages or blockages occur, they may cause misfortune, and so the circulation of luck and its movement requires effort – luck needs to be channelled (Daniels 2012: 148–149). We might conclude, therefore, that while luck as well as hope can pertain to particular persons, it is best protected and cultivated in relation to others. In any case, while the comparison between hope and luck may have its limits, the idea of flow or circulation is an apt one. The circulation of luck, in my opinion, implies not only movement; it suggests an increase, multiplication through maintaining relationships with others, in contrast to other resources that may be seen as finite. Hope, in the Japanese context, is perhaps best seen as a form of the commons, an inherently collective resource that flourishes when shared with others.

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6 Regarding the difference between hope and lack of hope, Swedberg (2007: 23; cited in Reed 2011: 541) argued that “no hope” is not merely an absence of the characteristics pertaining to hope, for the latter has specific aims, while hopelessness is rather diffuse.
References


