

## How Japan's Cultural Capital Can Enrich The World

Mr. Simon Campbell  
( U.K., age 34 )

(full text)

When people think of Japan what do they see? One of the first images would surely be the thriving, neon-lit, techno-bustle of the Japanese cities – a glimpse of the future. Another image might conjure the dormant beauty of Mount Fuji - emblematic of Japan's attractive and explosive natural environment.

Japan sits atop large swathes of volcanic rock on the edge of the Pacific Ring of Fire<sup>1</sup>. This provides it with fertile topsoil, great for growing rice, but not bountiful natural resources. Despite this Japan has built a thoroughly modern society, the third largest economy in the world. If we take these two images, the thronging cities and the majestic Fuji, they appear contradictory. How did Japan come so far?

In the traditional sense Japan is not blessed with the raw materials that fuel a thriving economy. Resources can mean much more than energy or building materials however. Japan is home to some 127 million people – its most powerful resource is its population.

Tokyo will host the Olympic and Paralympic Games in 2020 and Japan has a golden opportunity to show the world the richness of its culture. Tokyo hosted the Games once before in 1964. Japan was galvanised by hosting the festival of sport and welcomed back into the international community nineteen years after the end of the Second World War.

After two decades of economic stagnation and two devastating earthquakes, in 1995 and 2011, Japan stands at a similarly transformative juncture. Tokyo 2020 offers Japan a chance to show the world its resourcefulness. It can also show the world how Japanese culture can be used to benefit future generations across the globe.

This discussion will define Japan's resources and frame them in a way that enables Japanese culture to be understood economically. A number of current examples of cultural activities that hold interest or value to markets outside of Japan will be examined. Before finally, formulating a set of guidelines that can be implemented by the year 2020 to help Japan use its culture to help the world.

### Resources, Resourcefulness, Culture

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<sup>1</sup> National Geographic Encyclopaedia - [http://education.nationalgeographic.co.uk/education/encyclopedia/ring-fire/?ar\\_a=1](http://education.nationalgeographic.co.uk/education/encyclopedia/ring-fire/?ar_a=1)

Japan is the world's largest importer of liquefied natural gas, second largest importer of coal and third largest importer of oil<sup>2</sup>. It has limited stocks of base and precious metals underneath the four main islands that dominate its archipelago. Japan does have an abundance of trees with much of its land covered by forestry<sup>3</sup> and a longstanding history of nuclear energy production that has received severe scrutiny recently.

As technology advances new techniques emerge in the fields of energy exploration. Japan is well placed to benefit from the exploration of hydrothermal and deep-sea mineral deposits<sup>4</sup> off its shores. This is not something we hope to explore here however. Rather we will seek to explore a more visible, yet often ignored, source of Japanese energy.

Regardless of wealth a nation's greatest resource is its population. All the natural resources in the world are powerless without people. It is what you do with the resources at your disposal that really matters. Japan's richest resource is its population. Confronted by the harsh natural environment the Japanese people have had to be resourceful. They have developed a rich, diverse culture that values artisanship and respects resources. Japan's culture has beguiled visitors for centuries while its contemporary exports enchant for their innovation and quality.

If we expand our definition of what constitutes a resource Japan's outlook changes. If we include more social, that is to say the more intellectual products of society, in our analysis Japan suddenly appears quite resource rich. Japan's culture has played a huge role in its economic development.

That a volcanic archipelago on the eastern edges of Asia is the third largest economy in the world is remarkable. The latest UN estimates put Japan's population at some 127 million, the tenth highest in the world, above Mexico and below Russia. The tenth most populous nation in the world, not resource rich, and yet it has an economy that is the third largest in the world - Japan has outperformed.

In the latter half of the twentieth century Japan built a phenomenally successful export led market economy. But following the end of the so called 'Bubble Era' in the early to mid-1990s Japan entered a period of economic hardship which it is only now beginning to show signs of exiting. The financial reforms of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe which have come to be known as Abenomics may or may not solve Japan's economic problems but will not be examined here.

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<sup>2</sup> US Energy Information Administration, July 31 2014 - <http://www.eia.gov/countries/analysisbriefs/Japan/japan.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> United Nations Environment Programme, Inclusive Wealth Report 2012 - [http://www.unep.org/pdf/IWR\\_2012.pdf](http://www.unep.org/pdf/IWR_2012.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Sentaku Magazine, Japan Times, June 25 2012. 'Liberating Japan's resources' -

<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2012/06/25/commentary/japan-commentary/liberating-japans-resources/>

We will now illustrate a theoretical framework in which to place Japan's culture to make it more easily quantifiable and understandable in economic terms.

## **Cultural Capital**

By broadening our understanding of what constitute resources we see that Japan has much to offer the world – it can be an exporter rather than an importer. But an exporter of what exactly?

We seek here to expand the concept of resources to include the more intangible aspects of Japanese culture. We are interested, for example, in the years of study it takes a sushi master to refine his craft, the ways an architect communicates his vision, the way Japanese businesses operate rather than focusing purely on what they physically produce.

This appears a difficult undertaking - how do you quantify something as fluid as culture? How can it be used to benefit the world outside of Japan? To aid our analysis this discussion will turn briefly to the theories of the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and specifically his concept of 'cultural capital.'

Bourdieu looked at the concept of capital, money and wealth, and extended it beyond the realm of economics. He looked at more intangible products of society such as styles of dress and speech, customs and traditions, titles and hierarchies, and noted that they too had value and played a role in shaping the structure of society (Bourdieu 1986)<sup>5</sup>.

If we borrow Bourdieu's theory and tweak it slightly to fit our analysis we find that Japan is very rich in terms of cultural capital. Its customs and traditions are important factors in how Japanese society operates and is structured. Whether or not they can be sold directly is irrelevant. There is inherent value in the set of social practices that make much of Japanese culture unique.

This value should not be consumed solely on the domestic market however. As awareness of Japanese culture increases so too does the demand for Japanese cultural capital. This is a resource that Japan should market and export. To do so would be a mutually beneficial practice – for Japan and the rest of the world.

Japanese culture is rich, diverse and historic. To define it as a single entity is erroneous yet to pay attention to every subtlety would take far more space than we have available here. Instead we will analyze certain specific examples which hold relevance for a global audience. But firstly we will examine Japan's Olympic legacy and

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<sup>5</sup> Bourdieu, Pierre (1986). *The Forms of Capital*. In John Richardson, Ed. *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*. New York: Greenwood Press, pp.241-258.

future.

## **Rejoining the party**

As Tokyo prepares to host the Olympic and Paralympic Games in 2020 it is important to remember that this is not the first time that the city has held this honour. It is fifty years since the Olympics first came to Japan and the repercussions of the first Games are still being felt today. Hosting the 1964 Olympics had a massive restorative impact on the nation in both physical and psychological terms.

Japan stood at the crossroads. From the devastation of war and the horror of the nuclear bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki Japan rose from the ashes to become a gleaming symbol of modernity and peace. The 1964 Games allowed Japan to reintegrate with the global community and forge a new identity founded on the Olympic values of peace, education and development through sport<sup>6</sup>.

Tokyo 1964 gave the world a glimpse of the future. Japanese companies were able to demonstrate their newest products and latest innovations. The Shinkansen bullet train was just one of several infrastructure projects that coincided with the opening of the Games. The first Osaka to Tokyo train travelled nine days before the opening ceremony on October tenth. The Shinkansen remains a source of great national pride and global awe. The 1964 Games were a great success but a success the President of the Organising Committee, Daigoro Yasukawa, attributed firmly to one source:

“If the Games of the XVIII Olympiad were a success, it was because Japanese in all walks and interests of life worked together in close and harmonious cooperation—all with one basic goal—that these Games might be an unqualified success”<sup>7</sup>, he said.

As Japan prepares to host the 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games it stands at a similarly pivotal juncture in its recent history.

## **This way to tomorrow**

The economic boom that followed the first Tokyo Olympics lasted close to thirty years. Growth was rapid and Japanese products and businesses wowed the world. For a time it was good, but in the early 1990s it came to a juddering halt. When its bubble burst Japan’s economy was the second largest in the world. Two lost decades,

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<sup>6</sup> IOC Olympic Charter - [http://www.olympic.org/Documents/olympic\\_charter\\_en.pdf](http://www.olympic.org/Documents/olympic_charter_en.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Daigoro Yasukawa President, The Organizing Committee for the Games of the XVIII Olympiad, cited in the Official Report of the 1964 Games - <http://library.la84.org/6oic/OfficialReports/1964/or1964v1pt1.pdf>

bookended by the tragic Great Hanshin and Great East Japan Earthquakes, have had a dramatic impact.

As Japan prepares to host the Olympics once more the nation stands again at a point of weakness. But there is a chance for restoration. The eyes of the world will again turn toward Japan. In 2020 it has a unique chance to show the world its endurance and capacity for renewal.

Tokyo 2020 won the right to host the Games with a message that promised to show the world the future. 'Discover Tomorrow' was a winning message<sup>8</sup>. The second Tokyo Olympiad will show a shiny side to Japan that has always fascinated, a neon-lit, cityscape filled with the latest technological innovation and futuristic planning.

But there is another side to Japan that Tokyo 2020 can and must show. This is a world of tradition and custom, care and respect, precision and refinement. The two sides are not mutually exclusive however - they help make Japan what it is today. In the race to discover tomorrow Japan must not forget where it has come from. When looking forward it is important to remember the past.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe seemed to echo this sentiment when speaking shortly before the vote that awarded Tokyo the 2020 Games.

"Tokyo was chosen to host the 1964 Olympics in 1959, just 14 years after the end of the war. We were much poorer then than we are today. But Japanese back then were passionate about hosting the Olympics in Tokyo, and that passion fueled the success of the games."<sup>9</sup>

Japan must passionately embrace this second opportunity that they have to wow the world. The 2020 Games affords Japan a chance to show the value of its cultural capital. Japan can show-off the resources that make it such a culturally rich nation and show the world how they can benefit from them too. The modern Olympics are much more than a sporting event. The Japanese government, business groups and social enterprises must seize this once in a generation opportunity.

### **Small differences – big results**

As we are so often told when watching elite level sport; the margins between winning and losing are minimal.

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<sup>8</sup> Rupert Wingfield-Hayes, September 8 2013. 'Tokyo 2020: Japan's capital celebrates Olympics win, The BBC-  
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-24007994>

<sup>9</sup> Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, quoted in the Wall Street Journal. Alexander Martin, September 5 2013. 'The 1964 Tokyo Olympics: A Turning Point for Japan' - <http://blogs.wsj.com/japanrealtime/2013/09/05/the-1964-tokyo-olympics-a-turning-point-for-japan/>

All Olympians know that sometimes it is the smallest detail that separates gold and silver. This acknowledgement is reminiscent of a Japanese business philosophy that has come to enjoy great popularity across the world.

Kaizen is a realization that from small changes come great results. Translated to English it means ‘continuous improvement’, broken down further to its constituent kanji characters Kai means change and Zen means good<sup>10</sup>. Of course there is much more subtlety and nuance in how kaizen is understood but essentially it describes a set of practices that aim to improve the efficiency of a business, its workers and its workplace.

Its basic tenets are; small improvements, bottom-up, teamwork and continuity. At its heart lie the 5Ss:

- Seiri—Organization
- Seiton—Neatness
- Seiso—Cleaning
- Seiketsu—Standardization
- Shitsuke—Self-discipline

American statistician William Edwards Deming is credited with sowing the seeds of kaizen in Japan<sup>11</sup>. Deming was part of the post-war American administration and gave a series of influential talks and lectures that shaped the thinking of many Japanese economists, engineers and future business leaders. He emphasised the importance of quality control techniques to improve efficiency, minimise waste and lower costs. The results were startling.

Japanese companies, adapting Deming’s theories, enjoyed great success and Kaizen was born. By the 1980s, as Japan’s economy thrived, the world was increasingly curious – what was the secret? Kaizen became an internationally recognised brand and its export began.

The kaizen principles have gained widespread recognition and been adopted by companies across many nations. Japan has used kaizen for humanitarian purposes with Africa being one of the principle beneficiaries. Ethiopia has been a passionate adopter of the kaizen principles. Under the prompting of former Prime Minister Meles Zenawi the east African nation created the Ethiopian Kaizen Institute.

A pilot programme established in 2009 and organized by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and the Ethiopian Ministry of Trade and Industry (MOTI) was a great success. Thirty Ethiopian companies were educated in the ways of Kaizen and given help and encouragement in implementing the theories in their

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<sup>10</sup> UKKaizenInstitute website ‘about us’ <http://ukkaizen.com/about-us/definition-of-kaizen.html>

<sup>11</sup> Japan International Cooperation Agency; ‘Africa: With JICA’s Help, ‘Kaizen’ Is Being Widely Adopted in Africa,’ May 29 2012 - [http://www.jicago.jp/english/news/field/2013/130529\\_01.html](http://www.jicago.jp/english/news/field/2013/130529_01.html)

workplaces. The companies made an average yearly saving of \$29,000 each<sup>12</sup>.

A recent kaizen seminar held at the Africa Union headquarters in March 2013 attracted 160 participants from countries across Africa. The interest in kaizen is real and Japan must continue to promote its adoption. It can be a powerful tool for good.

Kaizen has grown to become a concept that is practiced in nations across the globe, independent of Japan. This does not mean that Japan should cease to champion kaizen however. Indeed to do so would be to miss a massive opportunity. As more companies embrace kaizen Japan has a unique chance to engage in dialogue with countries throughout the world, building relationships and avenues of communication that will prove mutually beneficial, not just now, but far into the future.

### **Building a better future**

One of the areas in which Japanese cultural capital is most visible is architecture. Japanese culture shapes the thinking of its architects, the design of their buildings and the spaces within them. This cultural influence has spread beyond Japan's borders and shaped the thinking of architects across the world as well. Many of the great names of twentieth century architecture visited Japan with the experience clearly visible in their work. Frank Lloyd Wright<sup>13</sup> is perhaps the most famous example although there are countless others.

Japan's architects face unique challenges posed by the unforgiving natural environment. In addition to style and design, Japanese architects must acknowledge geological concerns. This impacts their use of materials, the shape, scale and lifespan of their buildings. Japan's geographical position, at the apex of four tectonic plates, means it is painfully accustomed to earthquakes. Its weather swings from biting cold winters to hot, humid summers. Japanese architecture embraces these challenges boldly and innovatively.

Shigeru Ban is one of the most prominent names in contemporary architecture. He has devoted much of his career to helping disaster victims and was awarded the prestigious Pritzker Prize in 2014, the seventh Japanese to win the award. The prize judges described him as "an outstanding architect who, for twenty years, has been responding with creativity and high quality design to extreme situations caused by devastating natural disasters" and "has made a place at the table for architects to participate in the dialogue with governments and public agencies, philanthropists, and the affected communities"<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> JICA publication - [http://www.jicago.jp/english/publications/j-world/c8h0vm00005hwx9z-att/1305\\_02\\_02.pdf](http://www.jicago.jp/english/publications/j-world/c8h0vm00005hwx9z-att/1305_02_02.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Lucy Birmingham, May 27 2010. 'Frank Lloyd Wright's Japan,' Wall Street Journal - <http://online.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748704026204575267433344670608>

<sup>14</sup> 2014 Pritzker Prize citation <http://www.pritzkerprize.com/2014/jury-citation>

Ban's work came to the fore in the aftermath of the 1995 Great Hanshin Earthquake. His innovative use of paper, lightweight, strong and cheap, as a building material helped provide shelter for displaced people. In later years Ban worked in disaster zones in Rwanda, Turkey, India, China, Italy, and Haiti, and was involved again when Japan was once more ravaged by earthquake in 2011.

As a child Ban was enchanted by the work of traditional Japanese carpenters<sup>15</sup>. He studied in Japan and the USA but a respect for natural materials and the careful use of resources has stayed with him throughout his career. Critic Stephen Bayley<sup>16</sup> acknowledges this, identifying within Ban's work "a pervasive mysticism and controlled aesthetic that is profoundly Japanese."

Japanese architecture has influenced the world. It has reacted to the unique challenges that the Japanese environment presents and created a style that is enjoyed both domestically and internationally. We see here an example of how Japanese culture can be used to benefit the world. Shigeru Ban's work, heavily influenced by concepts and techniques that are quintessentially Japanese, has helped countless thousands of people around the world. By exporting more of its cultural capital Japan can continue to help the global population.

### **Master craftsmen**

Japanese architects are recognized the world over and other fields of Japanese industry enjoy similar recognition. In the arts, literature, fashion, medicine, technology and food Japan is widely respected. Domestically Japan has a long history of recognizing its specialist crafts people through programmes such as the 'National Treasure' awards<sup>17</sup>. Japan is very good at acknowledging its own cultural treasures but Tokyo 2020 offers it a chance to show them to the world.

There is a growing interest in the intricacies of Japanese culture and craftsmanship. This interest sees legions of food lovers searching Ginza basements for the best sushi in the world<sup>18</sup> or trawling Japanese kissaten for a cup of meticulously brewed coffee<sup>19</sup>. The world is waking up to the delicate skill and attention to detail that makes Japanese culture so unique. Japan must take this chance to show off its riches, Japan must show the world its

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<sup>15</sup> 2014 Pritzker Prize announcement <http://www.pritzkerprize.com/2014/announcement>

<sup>16</sup> Stephen Bayley, May 17 2014. 'You want a glitzy new cultural centre in Back of beyondistan? Don't call Shigeru Ban,' *The Spectator* - <http://www.spectator.co.uk/arts/architecture/9206661/the-architect-who-made-a-pop-up-cathedral-out-of-cardboard/>

<sup>17</sup> Japan Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare - <http://www.mhlw.go.jp/topics/bukyoku/syokunou/meikou/index.html>

<sup>18</sup> Dan Shapiro, May 3 2012. 'What's it like to eat at the world's best sushi bar?' *CNN Traveler* - <http://travel.cnn.com/tokyo/eat/whats-it-eat-sukiyabashi-jiro-worlds-best-sushi-bar-282966>

<sup>19</sup> Matt Goulding 2013. 'Daibo Dreamed of Coffee,' *Roads and Kingdoms.com* - <http://roadsandkingdoms.com/2013/daibo/>

shokunin.

### **Who are the shokunin?**

“These are people who pursue perfection down to its last decimal point, whose persistence and focus wear away at the sharp edges of life’s ambitions like a stream of mountain water over a granite stone,” Matt Goulding (2013)<sup>20</sup>. Shokunin embody the devotion to craft, skill and dedication that lies at the heart of much Japanese culture<sup>21</sup>. Across industries and sectors the principles of shokunin show why Japanese products have such a high reputation for quality. They take attention to detail to beautiful extremes.

### **The way forward**

Japanese culture intrigues, informs and influences the wider world in many varied ways. While Japan lacks resources in the traditional sense it is rich in cultural capital.

But how can Japan utilize this cultural capital to benefit the global population as the world’s eyes turn to Tokyo and the 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games?

In keeping with the Olympic theme we make three broad proposals which contain elements of competition, cooperation, international exchange, respect, excellence and friendship.

### **Kaizen across the world**

With the assistance of the relevant governmental bodies we suggest the creation of a contest to find the most powerful uses of kaizen operating in the world. JICA and local national governmental bodies in developing countries would work together to disseminate the terms of the contest.

Businesses in the competing countries would be asked to submit examples of how the implementation of kaizen practices have transformed their working environment and improved their results. To measure the impact companies would have to register their proposals ahead of a set timeframe, for example the tax year 2019. To ensure fairness and promote exchange companies would commit to visits from local and Japanese representative bodies.

The “prize” would see twenty companies from twenty different countries attend a kaizen conference in Japan that

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<sup>20</sup> Matt Goulding 2013: Daibo Dreamed of Coffee, Roads and Kingdoms.com - <http://roadsandkingdoms.com/2013/daibo/>

<sup>21</sup> Matt Goulding 2013: Daibo Dreamed of Coffee, Roads and Kingdoms.com - <http://roadsandkingdoms.com/2013/daibo/>

would be held to coincide with Tokyo 2020. Here they would be able to build business relationships and converse with other organisations in similar situations to themselves. Although primarily a governmental initiative private companies would be encouraged to sponsor the event and lend their expertise to the conference. Japan can benefit from the practice of kaizen and also lead efforts to benefit impoverished peoples across the world. Kaizen can impact lives for good. Japan must continue to promote it. This contest could continue long after the Tokyo 2020 Games and become a powerful international development tool.

### **Championing Japanese Champions**

Ahead of the London 2012 Olympic Games the British government launched a bold promotional campaign, 'Britain is GREAT'<sup>22</sup>, to inform the world about the business, tourism and educational opportunities available in the UK. Japan should do something similar – it must market its cultural capital.

To do this we propose a campaign focusing on twenty Japanese shokunin. This '20 for 2020' campaign would introduce Japan's shokunin to the world. Firstly a nationwide campaign to identify new national treasures in the fields of arts, crafts, fashion, food and drink, would be conducted. Businesses, local tourism boards and members of the public would be encouraged to make suggestions to a 'shokunin committee' formed by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport, Science and Technology.

Once these shokunin champions had been identified short films and digital media showing their artisan craftsmanship would be produced. A global social media campaign would be launched to amplify awareness of the broad landscape of Japanese culture.

The movie 'Jiro Dreams of Sushi'<sup>23</sup> has enjoyed considerable international success but Jiro Ono is not Japan's only shokunin. An exhibition would be held in Tokyo before, during and after the 2020 Games to tell the world about Japan's cultural champions. This campaign would build interest in Japan's varied crafts and cultures and help open new markets to sell them in.

### **Teaching the world**

Japan must do its utmost to teach the world about the full spectrum of its cultural landscape and economy. Japanese business sectors would be encouraged to organize, if they haven't already, trade associations to market their products and production processes. A pertinent example of such an endeavor is the Sake Export Association (SEA).

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<sup>22</sup> UKCabinetOffice-<https://www.gov.uk/britainisgreat>

<sup>23</sup> JiroDreamsofSushi,2011-<http://www.magpictures.com/jirodreamsofsushi/>

Formed in 1997, the SEA worked to introduce sake brewing to interested parties from across the world. One member of the SEA was inspired to create an internship programme to teach the art of sake brewing to people born outside of Japan<sup>24</sup>. The internship was a resounding success and has helped expand sake exports and production internationally. Europe's only sake brewery, Nogne O<sup>25</sup> in Norway, is staffed by a former SEA intern.

We propose the establishment of an international internship programme across interested Japanese business associations. Working in partnership with governmental bodies these associations would create programmes to teach international interns about Japanese products and business practices. These internships would begin in the years approaching 2020 and continue afterwards. This initiative would require a new type of short-term work and study visa and cooperation from Japanese government and business bodies but the benefits would be long-lasting.

Interns would return to their home countries as ambassadors of Japanese business ready to sow the seeds of knowledge they had learned in foreign fields. This would create lasting relationships and avenues of communication for Japanese business and open new markets for Japanese products. It would also help empower people from around the world and help protect Japanese culture.

Japan has an aging population. By promoting its cultural capital internationally Japan can preserve it for future generations. Resource management and sustainability are increasingly important challenges. This can be a major legacy from Tokyo 2020.

As we have seen Japan can help the world and help itself by sharing its cultural capital. Tokyo 2020 is a golden opportunity that must be grasped wholeheartedly. The eyes of the world will be watching. As in 1964 Japan can show its best qualities. It may lack resources but Japan is not poor. It can help enrich the world once more.

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<sup>24</sup> SakeBrewingInternship: Mukune.com <http://www.mukune.com/html/brewing-internship.html>

<sup>25</sup> NogneOcompanywebsite <http://www.nogne-o.com/sake.html>