


BOOK REVIEW

Ideogii to Nihon Seiji: Sedai de Kotonaru ‘Hoshu’ to ‘Kakushin’ (2019).

By Masahisa Endo and Willy Jou. Tokyo: Shinsensha. 280 pages (2,800 yen + tax).¹

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When I was a teenager, my family would drive to my parents’ hometown by car in the summer. Car navigation systems were uncommon in those days, so my mother navigated with a paper map while my father was at the wheel. At one point, she told my father to ‘turn left on the next sign’ (*sic*), and he followed her direction. Soon, however, she was surprised and asked, ‘Why are you going in the opposite direction?’ Now, this surprised my father, and he replied, ‘Because you told me to turn left.’ After some ‘he said, she said’ discussion, my mother finally admitted that she had confused left with right. In explaining her error, she added, ‘Although my mouth may have said “left,” I meant “right.”’

In almost two decades, this is one of my family’s most memorable stories, and I still reflect on the significance of my mother’s ultimate excuse. What if, as my mother had insisted, her ‘left’ really meant ‘right’ for the rest of us? Could we still communicate effectively if we did not realize the difference in our uses of left and right? Endo and Jou’s new book, *Ideogii to Nihon Seiji*, reminds me of this family experience, because their central concern runs parallel to the question above: what if the younger generations’ understanding of ‘left,’ or in this case ‘*kakushin*,’ is diametrically different from the traditional understanding of the same term among the older generations? In the political arena, can we still communicate effectively in the absence of a commonly agreed yardstick to describe politics? These are legitimate questions for one to ask before building theories based on political labels of left and right.

A large part of Endo and Jou’s new book is a translation of their earlier work, *Generational Gap in Japanese Politics*, published in English in 2016.² They have added three new chapters (Chapters 4, 6 and 8) to examine the causes and consequences of their findings. In the following, I first briefly summarize their major argument and focus on two of the new chapters. I then discuss the contributions and implications of their findings, specifically on the contested nature of ideology and party politics in Japan.

1. Key findings

Their central thesis is twofold: (1) there is now a clear generational gap in how Japanese voters understand and use the terms *kakushin* (progressive) and *hoshu* (conservative) – especially when rating the positions of major political parties; and (2) this gap reflects the differences in their perceived issue dimensionality, policy preference structure, and voting pattern across generations. Relying on rich public opinion data, Endo and Jou show empirically how the generational gap emerged in the 2000s, and how this gap is related to the generational difference in policy preferences, turnout, and vote choice.

Let us look now at the detail. One significant finding in this book is that the recent Japanese younger generations (most evidently the birth cohort of around 1975 and later) tend to rate the ideological position of *Ishin-no-kai* (the Japan Restoration Party, hereafter JRP) and *Minna-no-to* (Your Party) on the ‘progressive’ side, and the Japanese Communist Party (JCP) on the ‘conservative’ side (Chapters 2 and 5). This perception was shocking to Endo when he saw it in his students for the first time (p. 243), as it

¹I thank John McAndrews for his helpful comments and suggestions on the earlier version of this review.

²Willy and Masahisa Endo, 2016, *Generational Gap in Japanese Politics: A Longitudinal Study of Political Attitudes and Behaviour*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

runs contrary to the conventional understanding of the major ideological conflict in Japanese politics. According to this view, opposition to constitutional change and increased military capacity should be regarded as progressive (*kakushin*); conversely, support for constitutional change and increased military capacity should be regarded as conservative (*hoshu*, Chapter 1). While many of the older generation continue to follow this pattern when rating the positions of major political parties and in structuring their own policy preferences, Endo and Jou show that the younger generations increasingly do not.

In Chapter 6, Endo and Jou identify a similar generational gap in the ideological dimension of how ready reform-oriented (*kaikaku-shiko*) parties are to change policies from the status quo. They found that relatively younger generations (younger than 50 years old as of 2017) rated the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), JRP and themselves as more reform-oriented than JCP, *Komeito* (Komei) or Democratic Party (DP), and relied more than older generations on this *kaikaku-shiko* dimension in evaluating political parties and figures. Again, this is in stark contrast to the older generations' understanding of politics and the structuring of their attitudes, who tend to perceive no parties as more reform-oriented than themselves and rely more on the traditional liberal-conservative dimension. Together with the other empirical evidence presented in the book, Endo and Jou successfully point to a clear and significant generational gap in the fundamental understandings of political competition in the contemporary Japanese politics.

2. Why the gap?

The next obvious question is why such a gap is observed, but the book is not very clear on this point. Endo and Jou provide several important null findings that partly answer this question in Chapters 4, 8, and 9. Perhaps the prime suspect of this gap, one might guess, is that the Japanese youth are 'turning right' (Chapter 8). Endo and Jou reject this explanation, however, as their analysis of poll data over time suggests no such trends: the younger generations now identify with the 'right' no more than the youth in the past – in fact, they even observed a weak trend toward the 'left.' Furthermore, younger generations did not support the Abe cabinet more than the older generations between 2013 and 2017. They tended to be nonpartisan or to answer 'I don't know' to the cabinet approval question.

Instead, Endo and Jou attempt to explain the generational gap as the result of both cohort and period effects. First, as a period effect, they point out that the perceptions of the ideological position of the major parties converged over time as the result of party realignment after the electoral reform during the 1990s, a common experience among all voters. Thus, by 2010, Japanese voters across all generations came to perceive LDP and JCP as occupying more moderate positions than they had in the past (Chapter 2). Second, as a cohort effect, Endo and Jou hypothesize that the older generations who grew up in the Cold War period became so familiar with the *hokaku* framework that they have applied this old schema to the current partisan competition. By contrast, the younger generations were politically socialized after the Cold War, when the term *hokaku* was used much less frequently. As a result of the difference in the *zeitgeist*, the younger generations do not apply – perhaps do not even know about – the earlier *hokaku* schema that the older generations subscribe to (Chapters 2 and 5).

This argument is compelling. In the final chapter, however, Endo and Jou add an important qualification to this understanding. They test whether the party realignment produces a similar cohort effect among Japanese and Italian voters across generations. Because Italy experienced a comparable change in its electoral and party system in the 1990s, one would expect to observe a similar generational gap to that seen in Japan. Yet, such a gap was not found in Italy, from which Endo and Jou conclude that large-scale political change does not always create a generational gap. Thus, their careful analysis comes full circle: it informs readers with a nuanced understanding of the gap, but leaves us with a 'Why the gap?' question.

3. Discussion

The major contribution of this book is a warning against our implicit, often inattentive assumption that Japanese voters have a common (and good) understanding of ideological labels. Any analysis

that uses the *hokaku* or other ideological labels cannot ignore this warning, because such indifference can cause misunderstanding or miscommunication. For example, what does 'young conservative voters' mean, even when they identify themselves as such? Does strengthening the Japanese defense force imply a 'progressive' policy for them? Once we realize that we fundamentally disagree in our understandings of ideological labels, we should probably stop driving the car and establish what we mean by left and right, before miscommunication drives us into a scholarly ditch.

Endo and Jou's findings also highlight the politically contested nature of ideological labels. As they acknowledge in their literature review, an old ideological dimension can be flexible and incorporate new issues while preserving the structure of traditional confrontations (Kitschelt and Hellemans, 1990). We can further think of ideological labels as politically tainted boxes in which actors try to pitch their agendas, policies, discourses, and images, as some scholars go as far as to argue that the left and right represent a partisan confrontation rather than ideology *per se* (Arian and Shamir, 1983). The generational gap in *hokaku* understandings in Japan is a good example of this pliability in meaning and reflection of partisan confrontation.

I believe this has an important implication for the why question. If ideological labels such as *hoshu* and *kakushin* are political symbols the meaning of which can be shaped by political actors, a specific process of political meaning-making (Wedeen, 2002), in this case, a long-term partisan confrontation in Japan, should be what has created this generational gap. In other words, the gap can result from the efforts (or perhaps the lack thereof) of political elites to attach specific meanings – agendas, policies, discourses, and images – to *hokaku* labels. Such practices are commonplace in politics at the superficial level: in branding her party, for example, Koike Yuriko named it *Kibo-no-to*, or the Party of Hope, yet ironically her hope quickly faded around the 2017 general election.

What causal implication can we pull out from this, then? One possible explanation, which was not pursued in depth by Endo and Jou, is that the traditional *kakushin* parties (here I mean the Social Democratic Party, JCP, or even including Komei and DP) could not sufficiently construct or attach positive meanings to the label *kakushin* to persuade the younger generations. Put more bluntly, I suspect that the generational gap is the result of the failure of the traditional 'left' parties to provide 'progressive' policies to the younger generations, in comparison with the relative success of the 'right' parties (LDP and JRP). In the past three decades, have the traditional *kakushin* parties addressed the younger generations' concerns to attract their support? Have they even listened or talked to them? If they have not done so, then younger generations by no means consider the traditional 'left' parties deserving of the name *kakushin*.

In fairness Endo and Jou hint at this possibility in the last chapter: they note that the generational gap is not a cause, but a 'symptom' of political disengagement among the younger generations (p. 239). Now we should consider what this symptom implies: younger generations' ideological understandings, political apathy, and lower turnout or response rate in polls might be a symptom caused by Japanese parties' failure to respond to the youth. If this is a likely explanation, then future research should expand its scope to investigate how parties have communicated with the different generations of voters in Japan. This is certainly outside the scope of Endo and Jou's current work. Yet, I believe that they have opened up a new avenue of research in considering generational politics in Japan. I recommend this book not only to those interested in public opinion in Japan but to those who want to view politics through the lens of the generational gap.

References

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