

Hope and Society

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Abstract

Hope is a subjective representation that is wanted as something desirable in the future. Hope can be categorized according to factors such as achievability and sociality. In a Japanese nationwide questionnaire of approximately 2,000 people in their 20s to 50s, conducted in 2006, about 80% of respondents said they had some type of hope and 60% said that they believed their hope was attainable. The largest number of respondents described hopes regarding work, far outnumbering those who suggested hopes regarding family, health or leisure.

Hope that is considered attainable is strongly defined by three social factors. This makes it possible to explain why a loss of hope spread between the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s. First, hope is influenced by the degree of choices available, which depends on affluence. Analyses have shown that people who are elderly and perceive their remaining time as limited, and those who have been marginalized in education and/or employment and/or who have low income and/or poor health, are more likely to report an absence of hope. Social changes, such as the falling birthrate, increase in low income population or unemployment, worsening health conditions and stagnating school advancement rates, have led to a rise in the percentage of people who lack hope.

Secondly, hope is influenced by interpersonal relations based on exchanges with others, such as family members and friends. Individuals who grew up in an environment where they experienced expectations and confidence from their family are more likely to report having hope. Individuals with an awareness of having many friends are more likely to have hope. Further, those who interact with friends outside of work colleagues and family members are more likely to have hope regarding their work. Thus, friends have a great deal to do with the generation of hope not only quantitatively but qualitatively as well. The spread of loneliness among the Japanese population as a whole, symbolized by unstable family relations, bullying, social reclusiveness, NEETs, and the solitary death of senior citizens, has accelerated the spread of a loss of hope.

In addition to economic and sociologic factors, we must focus on the narrative structure of society, which is believed to be necessary for facing an uncertain future, as a

social facet of hope. Statistical analyses show that individuals who have experienced setbacks that forced them to modify their hopes, and who, with the background of having overcome such obstacles, do not hesitate to make apparently vain efforts, are more likely to have attainable hopes. If the society in story consists mainly of people who have had such experiences and or who have such characteristics, people are more likely to have hope. We also need to have foresight about the direction of society beyond simply acceleration and efficiency, while being expected to make strategic judgments to avoid failures and to use non-wasteful problem-solving thought. Social circumstances in which there is no shared new value in story to provide such foresight can also contribute to an expansion of the loss of hope.

1. “Why?”

At the end of the 1990s, a certain foreign-affiliated IT (information technology) company was facing a serious problem. It had been praised in the past as a place where women made remarkable achievements. But in reality, the company held a very strong sense of crisis, as many of its female employees were leaving.

To cope with the situation, the company decided to ask former employees to speak frankly about the considerations that had led them to leave. There were various reasons behind their resignations, but the person in charge of the survey finally concluded that the reasons could be classified into two main categories.

The first was, “I left because I could not foresee what would happen in the future if I continued working there.” The IT industry is undergoing drastic change, and the tough work environment requires workers to quickly respond to rapidly changing circumstances on a worldwide level. The female employees were making their utmost efforts to keep up with this situation, but they could see no stable future no matter how hard they worked. As a result, they became exhausted and decided to leave the company.

What was the other category? It was “I left the company because I could see what would happen in the future.” These female employees had various experiences and acquired knowledge and skills. They could foresee the future and do their work strategically. They were satisfied and fulfilled by their situation initially, but quite a few gradually lost interest in their work and finally left the company as they could see what would happen in the future.

These two reasons stand in stark contrast. However, the common issue is that the fundamental cause of the departure of female employees from a clearly prestigious company was not discontent with incomes or personal relations but rather a loss of hope in working itself.

People lose hope when they do not see a future. They also lose hope when they feel they can see the future in front of them.

Where on earth does hope come from?

2. What is Hope?

Many people have shown interest in our project on the hope studies, which was launched in 2005. The most common question asked was “What on earth is hope?”

Richard Swedberg in a paper prepared for an international conference on hope studies, held in December 2007, discussing previous work in the field, wrote that hope is “a wish for something to come true” (Swedberg 2007). He argues that hope is different from abstract

reveries or adoration, which are vague and not concrete.

Hirowatari Seigo delved further into the definition of hope, summarizing past discussions regarding hope studies and stating, “hope is a subjective representation that is wanted as something desirable for the future” (Hirowatari 2007). According to the Japanese dictionary *Kojien*, a representation, or *Vorstellung* in philosophy, is “an image of an external object expressed within consciousness based on perception. There are cases where an object is in front of us (representation of perception), and is reproduced by memory (memory representation) or by the imagination (imagination representation). This distinguishes it from concept or principle in terms of sensuous and concrete points.”

There are many commonalities between the two definitions (by Swedberg and Hirowatari). However, Hirowatari also suggested at the conference that “by action” should be added to the definition given by Swedberg.

Thus, hope can be defined to a certain extent but, at the same time, its contents are diverse. For example, signs containing the word “hope” (*kibo* in Japanese) can be seen in noodle shops, reading “no extra charge for customers *hoping* for large portions.” It is also used as an expression in eternal prayers such as “we *hope* that happiness will prevail over mankind.”

In accordance with the definition of representation, the former hope has to do with representations that exist in front of us, like the large noodle portions, while the latter relates to an imaginary representation of a future of happiness. While the former is easily attainable, the latter is very difficult to attain. Further, the former is felt by an individual who is ready to eat, while the latter expresses a desirable state for the entire society beyond the level of individuals.

Thus, various types of hope can be categorized based on a number of criteria, such as concreteness, achievability and sociality.

3. Hope for the Japanese

How, then, does hope exist among the Japanese as something to be fulfilled or attained in the future?

For the hope studies project, we conducted two nationwide surveys between 2005 and 2006. The first was a “questionnaire about work,” carried out over the Internet in May 2005, with 875 respondents aged from 20 to 49 years. Some of the analysis from the survey was published as a book, titled *Kibogaku* (Hope studies) (written and edited Genda Yuji, Chuokoron Shinsha, 2006). Based on these results, we conducted a second, larger nationwide survey on “work and lifestyle” in January 2006. We received responses from 2,010 men and women aged from 20 to 59 years. A detailed analysis is available in Genda (2008).

It seems that at the beginning of the 2000s, Japanese people had generally lost hope as symbolized by *Kibo no Kuni no Ekusodasu* (Exodus to a land of hope) of Murakami Ryu, published in 2000, and *Kibo Kakusa Shakai* (Widening social disparities among people with and without hope) by Yamada Masahiro, published in 2004. We, the hope studies project, also made a vague forecast before the beginning of the surveys that the majority of respondents would report having no hope.

In this sense, it came as a surprise for us that, in both surveys, nearly 80% of respondents said they had held some hope (more specifically, 76.5% on the first questionnaire and 78.3% on the second). Further, on the mail-in survey, 80% of those who reported having hope forecast that it would be attainable, as seen in their answers “Attainable” (24.1%) and “Probably attainable” (57.3%). Consequently, it was found that 63.2% of all the respondents had hopes that they thought were attainable.

Different judgments can be made about the fact that about two thirds of all the respondents have attainable hope. One can be encouraged that so many have hope, or be seriously discouraged by the fact that a third of all people lack hope or have only impossible hopes. In addition, we can only answer, “We do not know” to the question of whether hope is being lost among the Japanese, since no survey has yet been conducted based on an identical perspective or standard to date. A greater percentage of Japanese may have had hope during the years of high economic growth, but there might have already been many people who failed to have hope even during that period.

As of 2006, many Japanese had hopes regarding their work. In response to a multiple choice question on the contents of hopes, the top answer was “Work” (66.3%), followed by “Family” (46.4%), “Health” (37.7%) and “Leisure” (31.7%). We would like to conduct a further cross-national survey on whether the position of work as the top answer is a special characteristic of Japanese.

It is also clear that happiness and hope are closely related. In response to the question “Do you think you are happy now?” the percentage of people answering “I definitely think so” was 24.6% among those who reported having attainable hopes and just 13.1% among those who did not. In addition, just 10.3% of those who said they had hopes but felt they were not attainable answered that they definitely felt happy, a percentage even lower than among those who reported not having hope. Hope only leads to a strong sense of happiness when it is attainable.

We also asked respondents about the significance of having hope. Among the respondents, 80.9% said they positively appreciated hope as a vital force for life and/or opportunities to encounter people who shared the same purpose. On the other hand, 15.6% denied the need for hope or saw hope negatively, as shown by the answer that it was spoiling

oneself to even think about hope.

The data show that people with a more pessimistic and negative consciousness of the paradigms of society and/or their roles in it tend to have the least hope. In other words, people who believe “Society is becoming worse and worse,” “In general, we cannot trust people” or “It is not a problem if I, as just one person, do not vote in elections” are more likely not to have hope. Thus, individual views of society and hope are also closely related.

4. Hope as Possibility

Not all Japanese have lost hope, but this is not to say that all have hope, either. Why does this gap exist between individuals who have or do not have hope?

To answer this question, we conducted a quantitative analysis of factors that determine whether a person has hope or not, using the aforementioned mail-in questionnaire (Genda 2008). Specifically, we used a statistical tool called a probit analysis to look for factors in the individual questionnaire answers that influenced whether people reported having hope.

The analysis of the relationship between objective attributes and hope concluded that individual factors, such as gender, age and health, influenced the possession of hope. Looking at gender, women were more likely than men to answer that they had hopes, particularly attainable ones. Men were more likely to report having hopes related to work and had negative views on hope compared with women. In terms of age, in general, younger people, i.e., those in their 20s and 30s, were more likely to have hope. Final academic attainment also had a strong influence on the possession of hope. Those who received post-secondary education showed a stronger tendency to have attainable hopes and/or hopes about work. Further, those whose self perception of health was good tended to answer that they had attainable hopes.

Hope is also clearly influenced by income or employment situation. The analysis showed that individuals earning less than 3 million yen a year were less likely to have attainable hopes and, in particular, that people who had no income at all were very likely to lack hopes regarding work. Further, individuals and members of families with a total annual income exceeding 10 million yen tended to answer that they had hope, particularly attainable hopes. In contrast, members of households with annual incomes under 3 million yen tended to have unattainable hopes or a negative view of hope itself.

In general, these results indicate that hope is strongly influenced by the possibilities stemming from individual choices and actions. Youth implies the open possibility of time for the future, and the loss of health implies a limitation of the possibility of action. Education, by deepening knowledge, increasing experiences, and improving capabilities, also expands the

possibilities for choices. The fact that it is still more difficult for women to have hopes toward work shows that they have more limited employment possibilities than men in Japanese society. Needless to say, individual or household income directly influences the size of the budget for making purchases in the market. Unemployment means a loss of not only income sources but also of self-fulfillment and sense of self-usefulness gained from employment.

Japanese society suffered a serious economic stagnation from the 1990s to the beginning of the 2000s. The recession was also a process of negative change that reduced various possibilities that had once been open or at least believed to be open.

5. Background of the Sense of Stagnation

We can conclude from the above-mentioned analyses that the specific changes that cause a sense of closing off of hope are: (1) a higher percentage of senior citizens in the population distribution, (2) an increase in the number of people who are out of work or earn low incomes, (3) a decrease in high-income families, (4) a worsening health situation, and (5) a stagnating educational advancement rate.

A continuously aging population means, as a matter of course, a tendency toward a drop in the younger population. According to the Census issued by the Statistics Bureau of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, the ratio of people younger than thirty among all inhabitants of Japan aged 15 years or older was 25.8% in the 1995 survey. However, this rate dropped to 23.7% in the 2000 survey and, in the latest one conducted in 2005, to 20.2%. The decrease in the young population accompanying the aging of society is one of the background factors that have caused a drop in the percentage of people who have hope.

In the 1980s, Japan enjoyed a significantly lower unemployment rate than those in other developed countries. However, the rate rose sharply throughout the long recession after the 1990s, and hit 5.4% in 2002, the highest figure since the beginning of unemployment surveys. Issues of social concern include not only the increase in jobless people who are looking for a job, but also that of those who have given up finding work, the so-called NEETs (not in education, employment, or training). In 2005, we made an estimate of the number of people who did not have an income-generating job, including unemployed persons and NEETs but not students and housewives/househusbands, based on the *Employment Status Survey* conducted by the Statistics Bureau of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (Genda 2005). We found that the number of unemployed people aged from 15 to 49 years was 1.84 million in 1992, and increased by more than a million to 3.025 million in 2002. The rise in the number of jobless persons with no earnings is one of the causes of the drop in the percentage of people with

attainable hopes.

Throughout the 1990s, not only the unemployed but also so-called *freeters* (job hoppers), meaning people with a “career” as part-time workers, increased in number. The Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare estimated in its *White Paper on the Labor Economy 2004* that the *freeter* population was 2.17 million as of 2003, based on *Labor Force Survey* conducted by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications. The number of *freeters* increased from 1.01 million in 1992 to 1.51 million in 1997, growing by 100,000 every year. It is estimated that many *freeters* as well as “working poor,” who drew significant attention in 2006, earn less than 3 million yen annually, and this increase in the low-income population has led to a decrease in the ratio of people with attainable hopes.

As the economic recession dragged on, high income earners became limited to a small section of households. According to *National Survey of Family Income and Expenditure* conducted by the Statistics Bureau of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, the percentage of households earning 10 million yen or more annually among the 100,000 surveyed was 16.6% in 1999 but only 12.2% in 2004. This tendency led directly to a decrease in the ratio of people having hope.

The aging of society will bring an increase in the number of people feeling anxious about their health. The health situation has also worsened among the younger population. According to *Employment Status Survey* conducted by the Statistics Bureau of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications and other surveys, the ratio of people working for more than 60 hours a week increased during the period from the 1990s to the beginning of the 2000s among men in their 30s and early 40s and women in their 20s, all groups in the prime of life. Given the chronic long working hours and the shift to performance-based appraisal systems, increasing numbers of working people are said to have been stricken by physically or mental ailments. The *Survey on Workers' Health Conditions* conducted by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare suggests that people in their 30s to 50s felt more stress or had greater troubles about their work in the 2000s than in the 1990s.

The rate of advancement to higher education has nearly hit a ceiling, after a long continuing rise during the postwar period. According to *Basic Surveys on Education* conducted by MEXT (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) and the former Ministry of Education, the advancement rate, which is calculated by dividing the number of enrollments in universities, junior colleges and vocational schools and students studying at 5-year technical junior colleges by the total 18-year-old population, was just 10% or so in the 1950s. However, it rose accompanying the rapid economic growth, reaching nearly 50% in the 1980s. It further increased almost constantly even after the 1990s, when Japan's bubble economy burst, finally coming to exceed 70%.

However, the advancement rate has shown some change in the 2000s. From 2005 to 2006, it dipped by 0.3%. While it will make it easier for individuals who want to advance to higher education to enter university, since we have entered an era when university or college education is open to all with the desire to attend, households that cannot afford the entrance fees and tuition will have no choice but to forego sending their children to higher education.

There is no clear evidence that hope is being lost in Japanese society, since there were no continuous surveys on hope in the past. However, there is sufficient statistical evidence to suggest the possibility that an atmosphere of having no hope for the future has come to fill the entire society, as shown by the frequent use of the term, “sense of stagnation,” since the 1990s. A stagnation that prevents us from feeling hope has spread with the increase in individuals whose choices have shrunk, as seen in the aging society, increases in jobless people and low income earners, decrease in high income households, worsening health situation, and stagnating rate of advancement to higher education.

6. Lonely Individuals

A desirable society is one where many individuals can have hope as long as the possession of hope leads to happiness. What kind of policy, then, will contribute to a social situation that generates hope?

The policy implications of the above-mentioned questionnaires are clear. Measures must be taken against the falling birthrate in order to halt the aging of the population. Appropriate financial and monetary policies are needed to halt the worsening economy to make possible a decrease in the number of low-income earners. Further, it is essential to make the economy high-value added through technological innovation as a part of economic policies to survive within global competition.

Improving welfare policies, such as the pension system, is an urgent task to provide relief to senior citizens with low incomes and difficult lives. We also need to put into place detailed and sustainable employment policies that can be adapted to various circumstances in order to cut the number of jobless and low-income earners. Medical policies must be put into place to improve the health situation, and labor policies are needed to prevent chronic long working hours in order to help mental health care in the workplace. Education measures, such as scholarships, must be strengthened for youths who find it difficult to proceed to higher education. If these policies are implemented appropriately, there will be an increasing number of individuals with attainable hopes.

These policies were discussed in established social science fields such as economics

since before the issue of hope was discussed as the social science of hope. The main task of economics is to examine how to expand economic wealth and increase options in order to increase the satisfaction and utility of individuals. In other words, if the issue of hope goes back purely to financial capacity, all we need is economics, and there is no need to take on hope studies.

However, while in the hope studies project we have recognized the importance of such economic issues, we have presumed that fundamental social problems are tied to the representation of hope.

One such problem is the relation between issues concerning interpersonal relationship and hope.

The national mail-in survey we conducted included questions about personality as perceived by the respondents themselves. We analyzed the responses, among those with attainable hopes, to the question, "Are you good at cooperating with others?" Among those who answered "I think so," meaning those who perceived themselves to be skilled at cooperating with one another, 69.9%, or nearly 70%, reported having hope. The rate was about 5% lower (64.8%) among those who answered "To some degree." The percentages were even lower (56.6%) for those who answered "Not really," meaning that they were not very skilled at cooperating with others, and 48.0% for those who answered "I do not think so," meaning those who were not skilled at cooperating. These results suggest that people who are good at cooperating with others are more likely to have attainable hopes.

In contrast, we also looked at the percentage of respondents with attainable hopes according to whether they reported being "lonely" as their current situation. Among those who answered "I do not think I am lonely," 69.5% had hope. On the other hand, only 49.2% of those who answered "I feel lonely" had hope, showing a major difference between the two.

It is clear from the relation between having hope and the number of friends that hope is influenced by relationships with others. The percentages of people with attainable hopes depending on self reporting of number of friends was 75.3% for ("many"), 65.0% for ("quite a few"), 59.3% for ("not so many") and 55.4% for ("few"). It is obvious that the number of friends has a great deal to do with hope.

Why does having friends influence the possession of hope? Nagai Akiko explains some of the background for why friends give people hope: "We receive various evaluations from society, such as grades and appearance for students and assessments in the workplace for workers. In contrast to such evaluations made by society, friends accept us for 'our usual selves,' 'our natural selves,' or 'our real selves,' although their real opinions may differ. Approval from friends gives us a sense of being different from others, in a way that is not limited to roles and positions" (Nagai 2006: 99-100). The argument that acceptance from friends

gives us a feeling of significance that “our exist is valuable” and further leads us to hope in the future is somewhat persuasive. If this is so, then those at risk of losing hope may be not only those experiencing economic problems but also those who are losing their own sense of social significance due to the loss of communications with friends.

The increasing isolation found among Japanese people, as shown by the increasing number of single households in every generation and the emergence of solitary deaths as a social issue along with bullying, truancy, NEETs and social reclusiveness, has become an increasing serious social problem from the 1990s to the early 2000s. The fact that socially isolated individuals are increasing will be another facet of the society characterized by the loss of hope.

7. Expectation and Confidence of the Family

When we have difficulties communicating with others, family members, who are the closest people to us, offer their support. In fact, the possession of attainable hopes is also influenced by the family situation we experienced in childhood. In response to a question on the economic circumstances of their families at the time they were junior high school students, 66.5% of those who answered “Yes (We were affluent),” including those answering “We were somewhat affluent,” currently had hope. On the other hand, among those who answered “No (We were not affluent),” the percentage was 59.0%. Therefore, there was a measurable gap between these two groups.

However, there is a factor in the family situation of our childhood that influences current hope even more than economic restraints. It is confidence and expectations from the family. On the question of whether they had felt trusted by their family members during their childhood, only 54.4% of those who answered “No (I did not)” reported having hope. In contrast, 66.1% of those who answered “Yes (I did)” had hope. The gap between these two groups was more than 10 percent points, an even larger gap than that seen in the economic situation.

Expectations gave similar results. The percentage of individuals reporting the presence of hope was nearly 10% higher among those who were a focus of family expectations than those who were not. It is said that excessive expectations can make children timid or nervous, leading to a gloomy future outlook. In fact, it is sometimes impossible for children to fulfill the expectations due to pressure from their parents for an entrance exam, etc. This can lead to discord between the children and their parents or family members, distrust toward a society that does not seem to appreciate them, and/or deep disappointment. However, the surveys show that

expectations and confidence can be a driving force for children to awaken to their own potential value and strive to fulfill it, and this makes them more likely to have hope.

Of course, excessive expectations by parents and family members toward children's capabilities and aptitudes can potentially lead to despair. In this regard, it is important for family members to have moderate and stable expectations of their children, allowing them to find their own direction for their potential. Even if such hopes end in disappointment, the sense of security and trust that comes from feeling supported by family members can lead to further hope. As a result, even if the first hope ends in failure, it opens the possibility for reaching an attainable direction or a satisfactory situation where the contents of hopes are appropriately adjusted, as explained later.

However, the basis for such peace of mind and confidence in the family may be undermined. Ann Alison looks at changes in the family as a background for the loss of hope among many children in Japan (Alison 2007). She suggests that as a result of the collapse of the family system, which once supported a sense of security, young people are losing the capability to imagine a future based on peace of mind. She argues that the sociality of caring for others is being lost and being replaced by a tendency to worry about their own future.

Hirowatari (2007) defined peace of mind as "an emotional state that sees the future as holding no risk, that is, no danger." Based on this definition, he wrote, "Thus, hope and peace of mind are factors that give people a happy emotional state concerning their future." Though they are both factors that relate to future happiness, peace of mind requires continuity while hope characteristically requires some change in general. Hope and peace of mind have similarities and differences, but the finding that family confidence and expectations lead to hope suggests that peace of mind is an important precondition for the creation of hope itself.

8. Hope in Relationships

Human relations, such as those with friends and family members, have a significant influence on the hopes of individuals. An increasing number of people are facing difficulties with interpersonal relations, and the family, which functions as the base for reliability, has become unstable. Further, people who do not seem to have special problems with their daily personal relationships feel constant pressure to continuously improve their communication skills as the service industry becomes ever more sophisticated. The spread of such pressure is also one of the characteristics of an information and service society.

It has been argued, mainly in sociology, that the state of human relations is a crucial issue when thinking about the social structure. Specifically, concepts like "social network" or

“social capital” have been used as keywords for expressing the social structure of personal relations. Mary Brinton proposes the concept of *ba*, or place, as a characteristic of such social networks in Japan (Brinton, 2008). Strong collective ties in families and sometimes in workplaces have provided the bedrock for a sense of security among Japanese people. In contrast to US society, which is based on “weak ties” between individuals, a concept from sociology, Japanese society values “strong ties” within a *ba*. According to Brinton, the *ba* has been collapsing within globalization and low growth, and this tendency constitutes the basis for the change in Japanese society.

We suggested in 2007 that “weak ties” are currently more influential in the possession of hopes toward work, which Japanese value highly (Genda 2007). Specifically, we analyzed the relationship between types of friends and hope based on the questionnaires. Consequently, we have found that individuals with friends outside of family members, relatives and colleagues, who have “expectations toward them,” “greatly appreciate their abilities and efforts,” and “listen to their anxieties and problems” are more likely to have attainable hope in a significant manner. It has also been found that the existence of friends outside of work with whom it is possible to speak frankly makes it easier for people to have hope toward work, which is the object of highest interest among Japanese.

Why is this so? Communicating with people outside of our own family and superiors and colleagues in the workplace mean talking to people who have lived in a different world from our own and who have accumulated their own values and experience accordingly, which are different from ours. It can be recognized, from a sociological perspective, that possessing so-called “third relationships” beyond kin and work and gaining precious information from them, which cannot be obtained in our everyday lives, can help to create hope.

In a survey conducted in Kamaishi City, Iwate Prefecture, by the hope studies project, many people reported that interpersonal encounters and ties were very important for getting hope. It is easy to be impressed by the story of Yahata Toshio, a man in his seventies who newly placed his community’s hopes into the sale of mineral water after having patiently used forestry to repay debts amounting to hundreds of millions of yen that had been caused by the bankruptcy of an amusement park he had run to create jobs in the community. When Yahata was asked how he had been able to overcome these many hardships, he responded, in a faltering but clear voice, “I am satisfied if there are three persons who understand me” (Yahata, 2007). Kikkawa Takeo expressed the reality of Kamaishi as follows, “Kamaishi has hope, but there could be more. It is not shared yet” (Kikkawa, 2007). The main issue for the future hope of a community is that not only people in a certain group stand together but also that individuals with various backgrounds inside and outside of the community cooperate with one another based on weak ties. This is a conclusion from our research in Kamaishi.

However, the shift in the social network from strong to weak ties is not necessarily a smooth one for all individuals. Rather, there is concern that there will be an increase in individuals who lack both a sense of security based on strong ties and hope based on weak ties, after being excluded from all networks. According to some sociologists, the issue of poverty, which has grown ever more serious as a social problem since the middle of the 2000s, needs to be considered as a form of “social exclusion” in the sense of indicating marginalization from various social ties, in addition to the fact that there has been an increase in people in economically tight situations.

However, if it is possible to analyze hope purely as such human relations, as was seen in the aforementioned relationship between economics and hope, the hope studies remains within the scope of sociological research. But the viewpoint of hope has an important social dimension that goes beyond that possibility, thanks to financial readiness and the issues of social networks caused by personal relations. This gives us new hints for answering the fundamental question, “Why does hope in society need to be discussed now?”

9. Three Facts about the Hope that Remains

“Many of hopes turn to despair. But the repeated modification of hope leads to motivation.”

In our Internet-based survey about hope, we asked adults between the ages of 20 and 49 years what they had wanted to become when they were elementary and junior high school pupils. Based on 639 answers from people who were currently employed among all respondents, we investigated the relation between past hopes for occupation and current occupations.

In the survey, 70.9% of respondents said they had had hopes to engage in a specific profession at the time they were in sixth grade. Popular choices were teacher, athlete, driver, pilot, novelist and cartoonist. The remaining 29.1% answered that they had had no such hope or did not remember. By the time they were in ninth grade, 62.1% of respondents continued to have something they had wanted to become, although this rate is lower than that at the time they were sixth graders. Popular occupations in the ninth grade were medical and pharmaceutical professionals, such as pharmacist, nutritionist, nurse and clinical technologist, along with professional and technical personnel such as computer programmer and SE (system engineer) in addition to teacher.

Thus, 60% to 70% of current adults had hope to engage in a certain profession at the time they were in elementary and junior high school. However, many did not succeed in realizing the hopes they had held in their childhood. According to our survey, just 15.1% of

respondents were able to take on the job they had wanted at the time they were ninth graders. Only 8.2% of currently employed people had realized the dreams they had held as sixth graders.

Most of the hopes that the children hold are not attained. This is the reality that many adults face. For youths who experienced the circumstances in the early 2000s when employment opportunities were limited, the future was likely even gloomier with regard to their hopes for jobs.

In addition, youths in an information society are said to intuitively understand that it has become even more difficult to attain their hopes. At a time when there was scarce information on achievability, it was possible for youths to have “dreams” or “adoration” for future jobs even if they were beyond their abilities. However, youths living in an advanced information society seem to intuitively feel, based on the more accurate information, that they can never attain such dreams.

The respondents were also asked about their desired profession at the time they were in ninth grade, and subsequent changes. Some continued to hold onto the same hope, whereas others abandoned their original hope and chose another. The remainder lost hope and failed to regain it consequently. The percentages of each of these categories were 42.5%, 36.0% and 21.5%.

Next, we looked at the rates of employed people who answered “I have a challenging job,” and compared this to the answers on desired work at the time of the ninth grade and its subsequent change. Those who answered “I had a desired profession (when I was in ninth grade) but later changed to another” were the most likely to hold challenging jobs. The rates of those who have experienced something challenging were higher among them by more than 10 percentage points than among those who used to have hopes for a certain profession but subsequently lost them, never had any hope at all, or did not remember.

Those who answered “I continued to hope to become what I had wanted from the beginning” were also likely to be doing a challenging job. However, the most surprising finding was that those who had changed their original hopes to new ones were even more likely to be doing something challenging than those who had continued to hold onto the same hopes (The percentages were 90.5% in the first group and 87.1% in the latter. The rate was lower among those who had given up their hopes – 78.3%). The fact that a modification of hope clearly influences motivation has been statistically demonstrated in a precise way through probit analysis (Details are available in Genda, 2006. In addition, these results can be confirmed from not only the survey conducted over the Internet but from the mail-in survey. They are introduced in Genda, Sato and Nagai, (2008)).

Many hopes are never attained. For many people, hopes end up as disappointment. The literal meaning of hope (*kibo*) is a desire that is not likely to be accomplished. If an

individual wants to avoid disappointment or setbacks, he or she may choose not to have hope. Youths who say “I cannot find something I want to become” may be hesitating to express their hopes for fear of such a disappointment or setback.

However, some hopes can be attained only after one has once held and subsequently lost hope. When we feel, from our current situation, that it is difficult to attain what we long wanted, it is natural for us to feel considerable shock. But processes are still open for adjusting or changing hope, which start, or can only start, from a setback. In other words, there are hopes of our potentials and aptitudes that can only emerge from failures.

From the 1990s to the beginning of the 2000s, within a situation of enormous change in the political and economic systems, many individuals were losing hopes and failing to find new ones. An inability to adjust hope seems to have spread to the whole society as a loss of hope.

“Setbacks are sometimes unavoidable. But hope is waiting if failures are overcome.”

This is another finding of our survey on hope. The largest focus of hope among Japanese involves work. However, only 38.0% of people who are currently working succeeded in landing the job they wanted when they started job-hunting, and more than half have been unable to accomplish the hopes for work they held before they began working.

Moreover, even for those who were successful in landing the jobs they wanted, work has not always been smooth sailing with hope as a matter of course. In fact, when asked whether they had gone through setbacks and/or mistakes regarding their work within five years of beginning to work 49.0% of the respondents, answered that they had. These failures were experienced by 52.0% of those who had not succeeded in landing their desired job, but also by 43.8% of those who had been successful in getting their desired job.

We do not have data on the details of the failures. It is possible that the respondents were overloaded with work, had troubles in their personal relationships, or lost confidence. The point is whether they were able to overcome the setbacks.

According to our survey, 80.4% of those who experienced failures are currently confident of having overcome them. The figure is high but, at the same time, it is also significant that 20% still have not been able to do so.

This is significant because the experience of having overcome a setback in the past has significant influence on whether an individual has attainable hopes toward work. In concrete terms, among those who experienced failures during the first five years of working and managed to overcome them, 57.5% have attainable hopes toward work. On the other hand, just under half, or 45.0%, of those who experienced setbacks but felt they had been unable to overcome them have attainable hopes toward work.

More surprising is the fact that just 47.2% of those who never experienced any setback have attainable hopes toward work, a percentage similar to that among those who did not succeed in overcoming setbacks. The above results show that “experience overcoming” a failure is closely linked to the possession of hope (Further, it is confirmed that this experience significantly influences hope even when differences between individuals, such as gender, age, academic background, income and health, are controlled based on more strict statistical analyses).

Why are setbacks so closely linked to hope? Ishikura Yoshihiro offers the following interpretation. “I have stated that a setback is not a simple element of the past but rather a tool that we use to position our present self in our ties with the past, and this is also true for hope. Hope is not simply the future, either, but depends on each individual’s evaluation of the current situation” (Ishikura 2006: 143). While setbacks and hopes are opposite in terms of the time axes of past and future, they share a common aspect in that they are representations positioned on the basis of the evaluation standard of the present. This means that those who have words for talking about a setback also have words to discuss hope, and vice versa. It is certain that when an individual understands the meaning of a past setback and can talk about it frankly, the future described by such a person will be somewhat bright.

Uno Shigeki discusses the shape of hope from the perspective of time, such as “waiting” and “being late,” and focuses attention on the concept of “misstep” based on a work by Yamauchi Shiro, a researcher of medieval philosophy, entitled *Tsumazuki no nakano tetsugaku* (Philosophy in a “Misstep”), and explains the concept on the basis of a peculiar expression that hope exists as something “to advance” toward a future without an answer “while stumbling and backing away” (Uno, 2007).

It is also possible to recognize the relationship between hope and setback from a different dimension starting from hope in work and philosophical discourse. According to Sato Kaori’s analysis of the results of the hope studies project’s survey carried out over the Internet, it is clear that those who have not experienced romantic break-ups are more likely to have given up finding love or marrying (2006b). According to Sato, this has encouraged a tendency to give up love and marriage among men in their 20s.

In September 2006, members of the hope studies project conducted an interview with Kawai Ran, who has done reportages on a number of infertility treatment clinics. Treatment that offers no guarantee of success often leads to a loss of hope. “Trying to have a baby” with fertilization treatment “sometimes becomes a procedure for abandoning the idea of having children.” Some married couples speak quietly after the treatment is abandoned, using words such as “Thank you” and “I appreciate your hard work,” and come to feel that they have “deepened their ties” and “shared precious time” from the bottoms of their hearts. Kawai

expressed this fact as follows: “Giving up hope is not necessarily a defeat but can be a form of improvement, going one step further. A due procedure can become a next step” (Kawai 2006: 185-186).

We mentioned in Section 5 that the aging of society leads to a lower rate of people who have hope, based on the decrease in the percentage of young people that tends to have hope. On the other hand, however, a society where senior citizens are the majority includes many people who have had a variety of experiences in the past. In particular, the experience of having overcome setbacks expands the hopes of senior citizens. Further, if members of the younger generation can overcome a difficult situation they face thanks to the experience that is handed down, they are more conscious of the existence of hope in society as a whole. In this sense, a graying society supported by the experience of having overcome hardship can be a society that becomes a source of new hope.

In that sense, I was strongly impressed by a haiku poem written by Taneda Santoka, who was a poet of freestyle haiku.

“On a straight path, I am lonely.”

This passage may well symbolize the relationship between hope and setbacks.

Since the 1990s, and particularly since 1998, Japan’s economic system, which was once highly praised around the world, has experienced various failures (for more details, refer to Genda 2004). What has Japanese society learned from these setbacks? To borrow Kawai’s words, how has the society “improved” through the failures, and what kind of “procedure” has it tried to adopt as a next step? New hope will never be created if the experiences of setbacks are not verbalized and shared. Otherwise, it could not be possible to say that a “winding path” is “not lonely.”

“The stance of not hesitating to do something even when it’s in vain leads to attainable hope.”

As long as hope is a subjective representation concerning the future (as explained in Section 2), it is significantly influenced by personal characteristics and qualities. In fact, Sato Kaori statistically describes people who report having hope as having the following characteristics: “independence,” “a spirit of challenge,” “curiosity” and “not too much diligence” (Sato 2006a: 41).

Nakamura Keisuke suggests in his survey of Kamaishi that the root cause behind the failure of local revitalization is the lack of momentum for taking on challenges from the community as a whole, despite the city’s rich marine resources and potential for new growth through the development and sale of health products and medicines. Nakamura expresses the problem as follows: “There both needs and seeds (in Kamaishi), but few are willing to take

risks.”

At a seminar held in May 2007, Uno Shigeki quoted philosopher Washida Kiyokazu from his book *Matsu to iu koto* (The meaning of waiting) as a hint for establishing hope as an academic topic (Uno 2007). The concept of “waiting,” which has been proposed as an important element for thinking about hope, seems positioned opposite proactive actions such as “taking on challenges” and “risk-taking.” At the same time, Kasuga Naoki’s book “*Okure*” *no shiko* (Consideration about “belatedness”), to which Uno referred, includes observations on people who hesitate before making decisions and taking action, stop and consequently become “late.” Those who are late, as symbolized by *freeters* (job hoppers), tend to be seen as people who lack hope in a society where quick and efficient decision-making is required.

However, is this really true? Kasuga and Uno ask the following question: are not “waiting” and “being late” sources of hope? After a careful examination of the survey results from this viewpoint, I discovered an unexpected fact.

In response to the self-judgments on personal characteristics, which were prepared for the questionnaires, 44.8% of respondents answered, “I think so” or “I rather agree” to the general question, “Do you try to avoid efforts that are in vain?” The remaining 55.2% stated that they sometimes did not hesitate to make wasted efforts.

In reality, this difference in the way of looking at “waste” is deeply related to the possession of hope. The questionnaires showed that the percentage of people with attainable hopes was only 59.7% among those holding the former view, and a much higher 66.7% among the latter.

Further, when we conducted quantitative analyses controlling the influence of individual attributes, such as gender, age, academic background, income and health, a stance of not hesitating to fight a losing battle raised, in a statistically significant way, the percentage of those who had attainable hopes. We also examined those with a negative consciousness toward having hope. Many people who were reluctant to make vain efforts also had a negative stance toward the possession of hope, with 21.3% evaluating hope as being unnecessary. On the other hand, only 12.1% of those who would not hesitate to make wasted efforts took the meaning of hope in a negative manner. These estimates indicate that the willingness to fight a losing battle is closely related to the possession of hope.


Then, what types of people can adopt a positive stance toward efforts that risk being wasted? We carried out a probit analysis of factors that regulated the percentage of respondents who were working, excluding students, who reported they did not want to make vain efforts, in the same manner as in a conventional statistical analysis. Our conclusion is that younger male respondents in their 20s and 30s were more likely to answer this way.

Based on this, we come to the interesting conclusion that, when controlling for all

factors including age, gender, academic background, income, marriage status and health, those who experienced setbacks in their first jobs and overcame the setbacks had a significantly strong tendency not to hesitate to fight a losing battle. The experience of overcoming a setback often means that some effort, which seemed to be fruitless at the time of the setback, consequently contributed to overcoming it. Such memories may lead to an understanding of the importance of efforts that cannot be measured in terms of short-term benefits alone.

However, making wasted efforts and forecasting the achievability of hope seem mutually contradictory from the viewpoint of efficiency. The commonsense view is that the best way to attain hope is to unfailingly make rational choices without wasted efforts. What is the significance of the above finding that being willing to make wasted efforts is important for achieving hope?

In order to attain a goal that has been set for the future, we have to devise and implement effective strategies. To do so, we have to collect information properly, and select and efficiently implement an optimal strategy for improving the probability for success. However, this selection and implementation require, as a precondition, some driving force. Hope, as an impetus for the future, may be a form of recognition of the possibility of suffering failure and adjusting to it, in a situation where it is impossible to judge if the hope is vain.

If so, hope is essentially created in a situation where a risk is taken on efforts that may end up with  without being constrained only by the criteria of certain efficiency. It is difficult to encounter what we have pursued and hoped for without an idea of “playful touch” that does not exclude the possibility of wasted efforts. A hopeful encounter is possible only “with a daring detour and distance” (Uno 2007: 12). The process of experience consists of failing, waiting and being late. These things are proactive and important actions for finding hope, and not reactive stances.

The suggestion that both behaving strategically, on the one hand, and being willing to tolerate the possibility of waste and playfulness, on the other, are important for achieving hope appears to be contradictory. However, the ambivalence contained in a single event, which stands for taking a risk, behaving strategically and tolerating waste, is an essential facet in discussing hope.

The perception that hope contains ambivalence was steadily deepened in dialogues between social scientists and anthropologists in 2007. The catalyst generating this perception of ambivalence was a series of researches on hope conducted by Miyazaki Hirokazu. From his field work on securities traders, Miyazaki has discovered that financial transactions involving speculation and arbitrage, which are treated as completely separate under classical economic theories, actually stand in very complicated and ambiguous relations (Miyazaki, 2008). Economics textbooks tell us that arbitrage means acting to gain profits from a price differential

that exists temporarily in the market with regard to an asset that is supposed to be of equal value anywhere. However, while it is a way to gain profits that avoids risks as much as possible, it is also very similar to speculation in that it entails taking risks based on a given view of the future. In fact, Miyazaki argues that “ambivalence” is the heart of arbitrage.

The ambivalent situation influences not only the ambivalence of financial technologies but also personal hope concerning arbitrage. Arbitrators on the cutting edge of the market economy possess a sense of ambivalence with profound doubts on the behavior of arbitrage itself that inevitably accompanies “direction toward an end” as well as strong pride as economic leaders deriving from a high degree of professionalism.

Not only the financial market but the market economy itself has by nature an ambivalent, rather than unilateral, directionality. From the perspective of equality, market principles are often seen as an infamous system that leads to widening gaps between the rich and the poor. On the other hand, the principles naturally contain an orientation toward equality, with the same remuneration being given to individuals with the same ability and motivation through competition. Market economy has a history of having remained a “better” system than any alternative, while entailing various problems such as poverty, and by its very nature contains ambivalent evaluations.

Nevertheless, the ambivalent recognition was not shared in Japanese society in the period between the 1990s and the early 2000s when globalization and deregulation led to tougher competition and greater uncertainty. Few people were able to see more than just one of the two aspects of the market economy, either as a mechanism of fear that generated poverty or as the only prescription for stimulating the economy. As symbolized by these polarized evaluations of the market economy, only uniform assertions and concerns have been put forward on the desirable directions of society, and people’s flexibility and tolerance toward ambivalent ideas has weakened. The strengthening of such unambiguous social values, together with the economic stagnation and isolation of individuals, seems to have led to a spread of the feeling of a loss of hope.

10. Hope in Story

“What does it mean to have ‘no hope’?”

Nitta Michio asked this question in a seminar in July 2007 dedicated to setting up the hope studies project. People who are unable to find decent incomes or jobs, or who have health problems, and have limited options available, are likely to feel a lack of hope. The number of people with such sentiments is increasing. Another group that is unlikely to have hope is those

who have difficulties receiving expectations or confidence from their families or support from friends, and who face social isolation. However, are these only social factors for the sense of hopelessness?

The three facts laid out in the previous section suggest that there are factors, in addition to affluence and human relations, that significantly influence hope. While probing into the historical background of the change in industrial relations, Nitta proposed that people were likely to feel a lack of hope when they were in a situation where they were no longer able to “imagine” the future (Nitta, 2007).

At the beginning of this article, I referred to the reasons that led women to leave a certain foreign-affiliated company. People may decide to change their jobs in search of better working conditions such as higher wages, or to escape from difficult personal relations in the workplaces. However, the reasons mentioned here involve neither low salaries nor troubles in human relations. The women felt that they “could not see” the future or “saw the future.” They left the company because their imagination could not be stimulated there. In short, they left because “they did not feel excited” or “it was not interesting.”

Even when they face an uncertain future, people can feel hope toward a future challenge if they can see something bright ahead. On the other hand, even when they can forecast the future to a certain extent, they can still find hope if they have expectations toward something they have not yet seen. People may feel, “It seems nearly visible but is not yet in sight” or “It seems like I’m seeing it, but I don’t quite see it.” Such ambivalent situations, which can stimulate the imagination, can be another force for hope that is different from affluence or human relations.

How, then, should the company introduced at the beginning of this article have prevented capable female employees from leaving? Could the company have stimulated their imagination of the future and excited them by reexamining its personnel strategies, such as wage and personnel systems? Or, is it impossible for any system to halt turnover as long as it relies heavily on the quality and values of working individuals about whether they feel they have seen the future?

A clue for considering these points can be found in a concept proposed independently by two researchers in the hope studies project. The concept is “fiction.”

Hirowatari Seigo discusses hope as fiction in the law, referring to *Ro to fikushon* (Law and Fiction) (University of Tokyo Press 1999) by Kurusu Saburo, a scholar of civil law (Hirowatari 2007). Hirowatari states, “According to Professor Kurusu, ‘fiction’ is not truth; it is not true that people are free and equal. However, neither is it a fabrication or a lie. It is an assumption of a state desired by people, rather than either a truth or a fabrication.” When we say that a nation is established based on social contracts among people, or that people possess free

will, we are stating these truths as a state of a desirable fiction, which are not true or false. Such “fictions” are interpreted as hope for desirable change in the direction of a society. The fiction becomes a basis for stimulating the imagination of society and individuals regarding their future direction.

Annelise Riles, a scholar of law, links “legal fiction” to hope from a different perspective (Riles, 2007). A legal fiction is an assertion that is carefully made by a plaintiff based on something that is incorrect but legally useful, exemplified by a company being considered a person (legal person). Riles argues that it is only through such fictions that it is possible to look back at the past from the viewpoint of the present and, at the same time, to rearrange the future in a legal manner.

Sato Iwao, who commented on Riles’ report at an international conference held in December 2007, also argues for the significance of legal fiction. When individuals face conflicts, struggle or troubles in their lawsuits, one of their hopes from the law is that somebody else will listen to them. According to Sato, they also see the possibility of settling an unfortunate past and regaining hope for the future by having their stories accepted or approved by others through procedures and behaviors based on legal fiction.

The suggestion that hope as fiction plays an important role in settling the past and taking a step toward the future is identical to that of Miyazaki Hirokazu, who has carried out fieldwork on rituals in Fiji (Miyazaki 2004). The reason why many individuals have no choice but to constantly search for hope is that, as energy for advancing toward the future, they need a fiction to show a positive direction, which is neither true nor false. In this sense, hope itself is a fiction.

However, the word “fiction,” which is commonly used in Japanese, tends to signify a false nature rather than an ambivalent concept that is neither truth nor lie, as it is usually understood as an “empty wish” or “made-up story.” Therefore, hereinafter, we would like use the term “story.”

Hope is a story that is needed when confronting an uncertain future. A certain story exists wherever there is hope. The reason why hope can be a subject of study for social science is because the state of hope has a strong resonance with the social structure of the story shared in changes from the past to the present and from the present to the future.

The suggestions created by the three facts confirmed in the previous section have an affinity with the interpretation of hope as a story. The main characters in the story always experience twists and turns. There is no story without setback or failures, for such a story, if it exists, would be uninteresting. Only the experience of overcoming a setback can lead to the acquisition of eloquent words to talk about the future. In addition, for a story, unlike an academic thesis, the addition of redundancy and digression makes the contents more bountiful

and attractive. This fits with my suggestion in the previous section that hope is accompanied by waste.

Further, like many classics, stories that have been handed down contain contradictory and ambivalent elements and leave room for multiple interpretations. All classical stories, including works of literature, music and performing art, continue to be shared through the ages as they continue to have the power to be interpreted in a variety of ways. The story of hope is also ambivalent in many cases, and its contents contain diversity, which may be interpreted as contradiction.

At the same time, hope is like a story in that its ending does not always bring happiness in the future. Just like stories have tragic endings, attaining hope is not necessarily equal to future happiness. As shown in the data, attainable hope leads to a sense of happiness *in the present*. However, there is no guarantee that it will bring happiness in the future (Hirowatari 2007). History tells that stories of specific individuals and groups who hoped to break down the status quo through war and massacres can result in unhappiness for the whole society. In this sense, it is also true that not all stories of hope receive social approval, and this fact reflects the danger and difficulty entailed by talking about hope in easy terms.

In addition, the value of a story tends to be judged not by its practicality but by intellectual excitement and impression. The true value is not judged by the criteria of “usefulness” and “intelligibility” alone. Rather, a story is required to stir the imagination, as shown by statements such as, “it is interesting” and “I want to know more,” and this structure is common to hope. In contrast to hope, a “sense of security” is evaluated from a more pragmatic perspective, as it may require proof and guarantee.

The three facts presented in the previous section show that individuals in story, who are able to reflect on past setbacks and are characterized by the ability to think and act with flexibility not ruling out the possibility of waste, are more likely to have the power to create hope. A society in story is generated when such individuals are linked and, at the same time, circumstances in story are intertwined together to consequently create a story within the whole society.

Here, the society in story refers to a social context mainly composed of people who have been forced to modify hopes and who have the characteristic in story that they do not hesitate to make even wasted efforts, based on their experience of having overcome setbacks. Naturally, a society in story is more likely to have people with hope.

The structure of story of society, formed by accumulated individual experiences and imagination, is deepened by the accumulation of social phenomena. Some classics remain unchanged, but many others, such as kabuki stories, are given new contents or are subjected to new interpretations in accordance with changing eras. Likewise, the structure of story of society

continues to exist by changing constantly through restructuring, while maintaining its backbone.

These characteristics in story contained in hope may be a clue for giving hope to communities in economic decline. The first step toward hope for a community begins with finding and sharing something that can be a foundation for “preserving while continuing to change.”

Returning to the example of the workplace referred to at the beginning of this article, it seems that what was lacking was a shared fiction or story of a desirable direction, which was neither false nor true. A workplace filled with bumps and detours, setbacks and redundancies is by its very nature a good mine for stories. Some members of the workplace overcome setbacks thanks to their friends and colleagues. Even if it is a slow process, these people become more confident in their work. At the same time, they become interested in work in a true sense after finding “something invisible.” If they had encountered such a story that gives them the will to face the looming future beyond their own interest, they will maintain their hope for work.

As it is impossible for a company to prevent excellent individuals from leaving through human strategies alone, only a human story nurtured in the entire workplace can improve the atmosphere, leading to hopes regarding work. Hope can bring about higher productivity by stimulating individuals and organizations. Individuals and groups living in society need not only strategies but also such a story.

11. A Society with a Playful Side Provides Hope

Hope is a subjective representation of something desired for the future. As such, it is socially influenced by a range of possible options based on existential affluence, human networks formed based on various human relations, and the situation concerning the formation of a structure of story that goes beyond efficiency.

The future of the economic circumstances for the expansion of hope to the society as a whole is a rocky one, as seen by the stagnant economic growth and the loss of population brought about by the lowering birthrate. In this case, the restructuring of personal relations in society can be seen as a measure for expanding hope. However, on the other hand, it is also true, as a social fact, that it has become increasingly difficult to form inter-human relationships, as symbolized by the problems of social reclusiveness, NEETs and solitary death.

In addition, in the background of the spread of a sense of loss of hope there seems to be a sense of discomfort the strengthened emphasis on social values, such as the focus on efficiency and self-responsibility. The thorough implementation of market principles, as the core of a new standard, obviously brought a certain hope to a handful of persons along with a

concrete vision for stimulating the stagnant economy and facing tough global competition. However, as a form of hope, the market principles failed to become shared by Japanese society as a whole, at least between the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s.

While social circumstances require us to make strategic judgments and to have a troubleshooting mentality in order to avoid failure, we also need to adopt a vision for a social direction that involves more than just speed and streamlining. However, the current social circumstances, where there is no shared new social value for such a vision, have contributed to the expansion of the sense of loss of hope.

One remaining opportunity for hope in a society engulfed in a long-term recession and facing increasingly difficult inter-human relations, is to restructure a story for facing an uncertain future. Hope does not guarantee future happiness, but hope is a story that is necessary for advancing toward the future. A society with a story of hope is formed by people who can improve their capabilities for adjusting their lives while accepting past setbacks, and who have the willingness to take on apparently wasteful or reckless situations.

The perception that hope is being lost has been spreading throughout Japanese society, but has done so most rapidly in the countryside whose circumstances are more critical. However, even in areas facing serious economic difficulties, as seen in the “shuttered streets” and the shrinking employment opportunities, the ability to generate hope has not necessarily been lost. The survey in Kamaishi conducted by the hope studies project has taught us that a long-nurtured culture and traditions have the potential to become stories that can create ties among the local population, and that even the rocky history of economic ups and downs that has continued from the past to the present can be a basis for fostering a story peculiar to the area.

On the other hand, there are many causes for concern when looking at society from the viewpoint of hope. In particular, we will need to deepen discussions toward a reexamination of the values that are thought to be preconditions for discussing the direction of society. There has been a tendency, even in academic fields, for the standard of practicality to be given the highest priority, for elegant and easy-to-understand methods to be seen as most excellent, and for anything containing ambiguity to be excluded as being difficult to understand. As suggested by Kasuga Naoki and Uno Shigeki, it is difficult for society and individuals to have their own stories in circumstances where they are overwhelmed by solutions-based “problem-solving” thought.

Of course, society exists even in the absence of such stories. In this sense, a story of hope is nothing but something that belongs to areas such as “play” and “space” in society. However, a social situation where tolerance for play and space is lost may be the basis for the loss of hope.

Play is that which, among thought and action, is preserved without being given ex-ante

value or significance. Only play entails chance encounters or discoveries, though play itself seems to be useless. No creativity or hope can be generated in a society without play.


Once, when interviewed on hope studies, I said, “Consequently, I think that hope requires play.” The young reporter asked me quizzically, “What is play?”


I do not know why this question was asked. However, a situation where people need to look for certain definitions of hope and play seems perfectly appropriate as a symbol of a without hope.

* This article was drafted on the basis of data analyses, interviews, seminars and conferences conducted in the hope studies project between 2005 and 2007. However, all of the contents are based on my own understanding and interpretations, not the views of the project as a whole. I would like to express my gratitude for the opinions and cooperation of all the participants in the project. The full results of the hope studies project’s survey are scheduled to be disclosed through the SSJ Data Archive of the Institute of Social Science, Tokyo University in fiscal 2008. We will consider adding diagrams about our data analysis results as needed in the final draft.



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