



# Shutting Out the Sun: How Japan Created Its Own Lost Generation (Vintage Departures)

By Michael Zielenziger

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The world's second-wealthiest country, Japan once seemed poised to overtake America. But its failure to recover from the economic collapse of the early 1990s was unprecedented, and today it confronts an array of disturbing social trends. Japan has the highest suicide rate and lowest birthrate of all industrialized countries, and a rising incidence of untreated cases of depression. Equally as troubling are the more than one million young men who shut themselves in their rooms, withdrawing from society, and the growing numbers of "parasite singles," the name given to single women who refuse to leave home, marry, or bear children.

In *Shutting Out the Sun*, Michael Zielenziger argues that Japan's rigid, tradition-steeped society, its aversion to change, and its distrust of individuality and the expression of self are stifling economic revival, political reform, and social evolution. Giving a human face to the country's malaise, Zielenziger explains how these constraints have driven intelligent, creative young men to become modern-day hermits. At the same time, young women, better educated than their mothers and earning high salaries, are rejecting the traditional path to marriage and motherhood, preferring to spend their money on luxury goods and travel.

Smart, unconventional, and politically controversial, *Shutting Out the Sun* is a bold explanation of Japan's stagnation and its implications for the rest of the world.

*From the Hardcover edition.*

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### Editorial Review

#### From Publishers Weekly

After its 1990 economic crisis, Japan entered a period of stagnation and has yet to recover. Although at first limited to finances, this depression slowly spread to the country's political system as well as its national consciousness. One extreme example of the problem is the more than one million young men who have given up on school or employment, spending their days in their cramped apartments. In this well-researched and well-organized book, journalist and scholar Zielenziger reveals how these men ("hikikomori") are both a symptom of and a metaphor for Japan's ennui. With compassion and vigor, he presents close-up portraits of the hikikomori, while grounding their stories in the political, economic and historic realities facing Japan today. Zielenziger also suggests that women who avoid marriage and children, men who drink too much and both men and women fetishizing brand names are additional signs of the mass confusion and discontent. Seven years as a Tokyo bureau chief for *Knight Rider* newspapers has given Zielenziger the necessary access to this closed culture, though his exposé is bound to be controversial. His inclusion of both small details and the big picture makes the book as intimate as it is revealing. (*Sept.*)

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#### From Booklist

At the end of the 1980s, Japan's future seemed bright. A leader in the technological arena, Japan seemed poised to become the world's next superpower. Twenty years later, that promise has faded, and the once-influential nation is in crisis. Journalist Zielenziger, who has lived in Japan for 10 years, set out to discover why. Much of the focus of this engrossing, comprehensive work is on the clash between older and younger generations and on how the former's inability to let go of tradition is stifling the latter. Japan's rigid education and work systems have created a class of young people known as *hikikomori*, who literally shut themselves up in their rooms. Through interviews with several of these young men, Zielenziger reveals how the pressures on Japanese youths cause some to give up and retreat from society. Young women, too, are rejecting traditional roles and choosing careers with foreign companies over marriage and children. A piercing, astute look at how a society's refusal to embrace change is detrimental to its younger generation.

*Kristine Huntley*

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#### Review

"Full of surprises and fresh discoveries, *Shutting Out the Sun* convincingly explains why the great Japanese juggernaut has faltered--and it does so with intelligence, insight, and verve. It's the keenest view of the Japanese character since Ruth Benedict's classic *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, a worthy successor."  
--Richard Rhodes

"Michael Zielenziger's focus on the real people who make up modern Japan is what makes his book so fascinating. He shows what the change in Japan's overall fortunes has done to its citizenry, and how their response affects their country's future prospects--and its effects on the world. This is an important look at a limitlessly intriguing culture."

--James Fallows

"Michael Zielenziger offers us a classic, and a warning."

--Studs Terkel

"An incisive, well-written account of Japan's recent social and economic malaise, including a frightening portrait of the nation's hikikomori: disaffected youths who lock themselves in their rooms for months or years at a time as a way of coping with life in a society that denies them self-expression....Nuanced reporting on a tradition-bound society struggling to find its way in the 21st century."

--*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

"A good metaphor is a powerful thing. It can transmit truth instantly with an intuitive clarity that plain exposition can't achieve. In his trenchant examination of declining, post-Bubble Japan, Michael Zielenziger has found such a metaphor. The core of *Shutting Out the Sun* is a lively analysis of the crisis. *Shutting Out the Sun* puts a human face on the nation's plight and provides an intriguing point of entry into a consideration of Japan's crisis of confidence."

-- *The Washington Post*

"Well researched and clearly written...*Shutting Out the Sun*'s centerpieces -- profiles of *hikikomori* the author i...

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