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Thomas T. Sekine as a Japan Specialist in Canada: Reminiscences of a Former Student on His Intellectual Openness¹

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Introduction

Thomas T. Sekine (1933–2022) was widely recognized for introducing Kozo Uno’s theories to the English-speaking world, beginning with his seminal *Journal of Economic Literature* article on “Uno-riron” (Sekine 1975) and later through his English translation of Uno’s *Principles of Political Economy* (Uno 1980). Sekine further contributed by refining and extending Uno’s Marxian economics, leaving a lasting impact on the field and inspiring followers such as the prolific political scientist Robert Albritton (see, e.g., Albritton 1986 and Albritton 2009). Sekine did, however, have other important intellectual interests and achievements, and consideration of these are necessary for a thorough and balanced appreciation of his career.²

In this paper, I will focus on the lesser-known subject of Sekine’s contributions to Japan studies in Canada from the 1980s to the mid-1990s, a subject I observed first-hand as a Master’s student who studied with Sekine,³ as a Ph.D. student who completed a dissertation (MacLean 1989a) under Sekine’s supervision, as his teaching assistant for a course on the

¹ I would like to acknowledge that email correspondence with Tomiichi Hoshino, Kazuko Sekine, James Thiessen, and Masao Yokouchi was very helpful to me in writing this paper. I would also like to thank Kathleen Stokes for her valuable assistance in helping me locate several key sources. However, I take full responsibility for any errors or omissions in this paper.

² Sekine was one of three key mentors in my academic career. The others have been Lars Osberg of Dalhousie University (see MacLean 2000 and 2014) and the late Shohken Mawatari of Tohoku University (see MacLean 2015).

³ As a Master’s economics student in Sekine’s course, I wrote a review article based on Sekine’s translation of Uno (1980) that was published in English (MacLean 1981) and Japanese (MacLean 1982).

Japanese economy, and as a fellow member of the Japan Studies Association of Canada.⁴ I claim that as a Japan specialist in Canada, Sekine exhibited an exceptional capacity to engage with scholars and scholarship from various intellectual traditions. The first section of the paper examines Sekine's approach to teaching about the Japanese economy. The second section details his involvement with the Japan Studies Association of Canada. The third section analyzes a contribution of his to applied analysis of the Japanese economy. The final section provides a brief summary and a reflection on Sekine's intellectual versatility.

Teaching the Japanese Economy

Interest in the Japanese economy surged significantly in English-speaking countries during the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s. This was largely due to Japan's rapid post-war economic growth, which led to its emergence as a high-income economy and the world's second largest capitalist economy.⁵ The "Japanese economic miracle" was widely seen as something of a model for other economies, even the United States of America, and its success, particularly in manufacturing, technology, and industrial policy, drew attention from scholars, policymakers, and business leaders.⁶ By the 1980s, a wide range of universities in the United States and Canada began to offer courses on the Japanese economy, particularly universities that already had Japanese studies programs offering courses on Japanese

⁴ During the 1980s and the 1990s until Sekine retired from York University in 1994, Sekine and Robert Albritton were the key figures in a study group consisting mostly of York graduate students but also visiting Japanese scholars who met at Albritton's home in Toronto. I attended the study group meetings many times when I lived in Toronto.

⁵ The two most common ways to compare economies by GDP per-capita and overall size are by making data comparable with a market exchange rate conversion (nominal method) or with a purchasing power parity conversion (PPP method). According to World Bank data at <https://wits.worldbank.org/>, By the nominal measure of GDP, Japan was the second largest economy in 1988 (and earlier, but the data source covers from 1988) and continued to be until 2009, and by the nominal measure of GDP per capita, Japan outranked the United States from 1988 to 2000 except for 1998 (due to the weak yen of that year).

⁶ Japan also developed into a major trading partner of many countries during this period, and this was also a cause of increased interest in the Japanese economy. For example, by the 1980s Japan had become Canada's second-largest trading partner (as measured by import and export shares). In Nakamura and Vertinsky (1994), four of the nine chapters touch upon Canada-Japan bilateral trade and investment.

language and culture. York University in Toronto, Ontario, where Sekine taught, was one such university, and he began teaching a course on the Japanese economy at York in the 1980s.

When Sekine began teaching his course on the Japanese economy, two approaches were common for the course materials. One was to use selected readings: for example, from a collection such as Patrick and Rosovsky (1976) or Patrick and Yasuba (1987). Another was to use a book on Japanese economic history such as Kosai (1986), Nakamura (1981), or the fourth edition of Allen (1981). Later some courses would use textbooks on the Japanese economy such as Ito (1992), Flath (2000), or, in Canada, Nakamura and Vertinsky (1994).

When I was his teaching assistant in the late 1980s, Sekine followed the economic history approach. His assigned textbook *Japan's Postwar Economy: An Insider's View of Its History and Its Future* (Uchino 1983) by Tatsuro Uchino, a professor of economics at Sophia University. A key factor behind Sekine's choice of this textbook was his appreciation of Uchino's insider perspective. Upon graduating in economics from the University of Tokyo in 1948, Uchino had joined the Economic Stabilization Board and later worked for the Economic Planning Agency where he participated in drafting 15 Economic White Papers.

Drawing on Uchino's book, Sekine guided students through Japan's economic evolution, from the destruction of World War II to its subsequent growth into an industrial superpower. Sekine's lectures were rooted in historical analysis, emphasizing that Japan's postwar recovery and subsequent high economic growth was not simply the result of following a fixed economic model. The Japanese economy was the outcome of specific historical, social, and political developments, and it had evolved and changed in important ways even in the postwar period, and it would continue to evolve.

Indeed, following the collapse of the “bubble economy” (as indicated by the stock market crash beginning at the end of 1989 and the long decline of real estate prices from 1992)⁷, Sekine was quick to recognize that the recession that followed the stock market crash was not an ordinary one, that the Japanese economy had reached a turning point. I recall him mentioning that he had read Yoshikazu Miyazaki’s book on the recession (Miyazaki 1992), and found it insightful.⁸ Miyazaki called attention to the interplay of various factors that compounded the downturn, making it resistant to conventional policy responses. Among the factors were the negative wealth effect of the stock market and real estate collapse, debt overhang, nonperforming loans, deflation, demographic challenges from Japan’s aging population, slowing productivity growth, and increasing competition from other East Asian economies.

Sometime in the first half of the 1990s, when James Thiessen⁹ served as his teaching assistant for the course, Sekine switched from using Uchino (1983) as his assigned textbook to using Hane (1992). While Uchino's book concentrates specifically on the economic aspects of Japan's postwar period, Hane's book covers a broad historical timeline, starting with a chapter of Japan before the 17th century, and devoting only a few chapters to the period after World War II.

Some instructors of courses on the Japanese economy would be sure to choose course materials to reflect the instructor’s theoretical orientation and would set exams to test that the students had grasped that theoretical orientation. For example, a typical neoclassical

⁷ I have analyzed the “bubble economy” and its aftermath in, e.g., MacLean (2006).

⁸ Miyazaki’s contributions, including his 1992 book, are discussed in Uemura (2023).

⁹ James (Jim) H. Thiessen is currently an Associate Professor in Global Management Studies at Ted Rogers School of Management of Toronto Metropolitan (formerly Ryerson) University and President of the Japan Studies Association of Canada. He completed his PhD at York in Administrative Studies from 1990-95. His interest in Japan preceded his Ph.D. studies at York, as evidenced by his participation in the activities of the Canada-Japan Society of Toronto. He had training in mainstream economics from his M.A. in Agricultural Economics but did not study economics at York University.

economist would assign plenty of material written from a neoclassical perspective, and a typical Marxist economist would assign plenty of material written from a Marxist perspective, and both would be keen to test that their students appreciated the perspective from which the course had been taught. But Sekine's approach was more to have students be exposed to the facts of history so that they could develop their own interpretations of events. He even left formulation of exam questions for his Japanese economy course to his teaching assistant Jim Thiessen, with whom he did not share a common theoretical perspective but rather a shared knowledge of Japanese history. Sekine's approach is indicative of his intellectual flexibility.

Intellectual Flexibility in Action: Japan Studies Association of Canada

Sekine's intellectual flexibility was also evident in his participation in the Japan Studies Association of Canada (JSAC). The creation of JSAC was instrumental in providing Japan specialists in Canada with a forum specifically dedicated to Japanese studies. Before JSAC's founding in the late 1980s, scholars of Japan would meet at the conferences of more general associations, such as the Canadian Association for Asian Studies. With funding from the Japan Foundation, JSAC enabled scholars from various disciplines to engage in focused discussions on Japan.

Sekine's involvement in JSAC was extensive. He participated in the association's annual conferences for several years starting with the inception of JSAC, engaging in interdisciplinary dialogue with scholars such as Richard Beason (economist, University of Windsor and later University of Alberta), Millie Creighton (anthropologist, University of British Columbia), Michael Donnelly (political scientist, University of Toronto), David Edington (geographer, University of British Columbia), Fumiko Ikawa-Smith (anthropologist, McGill University), Jacob Kovalio (historian, Carleton University), Akira

Kubota (political scientist, University of Windsor), Charles McMillan (strategic management expert and a specialist in Japanese industrial systems, York University), Masao Nakamura (economist, University of Alberta and later University of British Columbia), Norio Ota (linguist and Japanese language educator, York University), and Klaus Pringsheim (political scientist and president of the Canada-Japan Trade Council). The JSAC conferences were relatively small ones in which most participants attended most or all sessions, even sessions on subjects far removed from their fields of specialization, and discussed issues with a wide range of other participants during lunches, dinners, and breaks.

The conference programs of JSAC, which have been maintained online (at http://www.jsac.ca/jsac_past.html) by Professor Norio Ota of York University, show a consistent presence of Sekine's name from JSAC's founding in 1988 until 1993, the year before Sekine retired from York University and returned to Japan. The program for JSAC's first conference, which was held at McGill University in Montreal, lists Sekine as a discussant of a paper on "'Market Structure and Japanese Export Prices: An Industrial-organization Approach to Export Prices" by Professor Kazuharu Kiyono, an economist with Gakushuin University, in a session chaired by Harry Nishio, a sociologist with the University of Toronto. Sekine's comments were published as Sekine (1989).¹⁰

In the program for the 1989 JSAC conference, which was held at York University, Sekine was particularly active. He is listed as a discussant, alongside Barbara Brooks of the Centre for East Asian Studies at McGill University, for a paper by John Howes of the Department of Asian Studies at the University of British Columbia titled 'Reign names, constitutions, and late twentieth-century Japan.' The session on modern history is chaired by Jacob Kovalio of the Department of History at Carleton University. Sekine's comments on Howe's paper were

¹⁰ After the conference program was issued, I was added as a discussant of the Kiyono paper (MacLean 1989).

published as Sekine (1990b).¹¹ They deal with the “Meiji Constitution of 1889 and the Emperor Showa’s part in the last war.” Sekine is also listed along with Akira Kubota (Windsor), Ted Goosen (York), Masao Nakamura (Alberta), and Harry Nishio (Toronto) as a discussant in a roundtable chaired by John Saywell (Toronto) on “Present state of Japanese studies in Canada”, and he chaired the conference-concluding business meeting on the future of the JSAC. Sekine co-edited and published a volume of papers selected from those presented at the conference (Daly and Sekine 1990).

JSAC’s third conference was held in 1990 in Vancouver at the University of British Columbia, and Sekine was on the program in a session on Japanese economics chaired by Masao Nakamura (Alberta) as the discussant of paper by Klaus Weiermair (York) on “International competition and the Japanization of European industry. Sekine’s discussant remarks were published as Sekine (1991).¹²

At JSAC’s fourth conference, held in 1991 in Winnipeg at the University of Manitoba, and at JSAC’s fifth conference, held in 1992 in Ottawa at Carleton University, Sekine’s formal role in the programs was serving as a session chair. The program for the fourth conference indicates that Sekine chaired a session on “Changing face of Japan’s economy” with papers from Richard Beason (Alberta) and Richard Parker (Waterloo) and the program for the fifth conference lists Sekine as the chair of a session with presentations from Richard Beason (Alberta), David Edington (UBC), me, and Charles McMillan (York).

The program for the sixth JSAC conference, held in 1993 at Concordia University in Montreal includes a session on “Japan’s economic image” chaired by Takashi Tsushima

¹¹ In his published comments, Sekine makes reference to a paper (Sekine 1990a) on the internationalization of Japanese education that he had presented at a conference on education held in Victoria, British Columbia, a day or two before the JSAC conference in Vancouver, British Columbia.

¹² In the same session, I was the discussant (see MacLean 1991) of a paper on “Cost of capital by firm scale in Japan” by Richard Beason (Alberta).

(University of Alberta) and featuring presentations by Donald Daly, Keizo Nagatani, and Sekine, and comments from David Edington (British Columbia), Kazuo Kusano (Concordia) and Masao Nakamura (Alberta). Sekine's presentation led to the publication Sekine (1995), which I will discuss in the next section of this paper.

Sekine's connections with Keizo Nagatani (1937–2020) and Donald Daly (1922–2022), his two co-presenters in the “Japan's economic image” session were particularly significant. Although Nagatani has achieved acclaim as a mainstream or orthodox macroeconomist with publications such as Nagatani (1978) and Nagatani (1981), by the late 1980s he was becoming less orthodox, as evidenced by his *Political Macroeconomics* published in 1989. He had in common with Sekine a thorough training in mainstream economics, but they had both come to recognize the limitations of that economics. Just as Sekine appreciated the policy-world experience of Tatsuro Uchino, the author of the textbook he used in his Japanese economy course when I was his teaching assistant, so he appreciated Nagatani's policy-world experience. Upon graduation from Hitotsubashi University in 1959¹³, Nagatani had joined the Japanese Ministry of Finance, and his areas of duty included the Bank of Japan, financial institutions, and government investments until he resigned in 1965 to pursue graduate studies in the United States (Nagatani 1989: 225-228). Sekine was responsible for inviting Nagatani to serve as the external examiner for my Ph.D. dissertation in 1989.¹⁴

Sekine's collaboration with Donald Daly, a professor of economics in the business school at York University, reflected even more strongly his willingness to work across intellectual boundaries. Daly had earned his Ph.D. from the Department of Economics at the University of Chicago, a famous hub for free-market economics. Sekine appreciated that before entering

¹³ The periods of Sekine and Nagatani as undergraduates at Hitotsubashi University overlapped, but I have no information about whether they had known one another as undergraduates. Sekine graduated two years before Nagatani.

¹⁴ I would later publish a review of Nagatani's *Political Macroeconomics* (MacLean 1992).

academia, Daly had worked for the Canadian federal government for 22 years at the the Economics Branch of the Department of Trade and Commerce, the Royal Commission on Money and Banking, and with the Economic Council of Canada (Dignity Memorial 2022). Daly joined the business school at York University in 1969, where he taught managerial economics (see Daly 1988) and other related subjects, and pursued studies on a wide range of topics, including ones related to Japan. He visited Japan nine times.¹⁵ Together, Sekine and Daly co-edited *Discovering Japan: Issues for Canadians* (1990), a volume that explored the economic and political dimensions of Japan's trade relations with Canada. Sekine recruited Daly to serve on my Ph.D. dissertation committee.

From the founding of JSAC in 1988 until his retirement from York University in 1994, Sekine participated in JSAC conferences without fail. Through his extensive involvement with JSAC, Sekine exemplified his intellectual flexibility and commitment to interdisciplinary dialogue. His collaborations, particularly with figures like Donald Daly and Keizo Nagatani, further demonstrate his ability to appreciate varied academic and professional experiences.

Sekine's Contribution to Applied Economic Analysis

Sekine is best known for his work on Marxian economic theory, to which he made many contributions. He made far fewer contributions to applied economic analysis, but they demonstrate his intellectual versatility. An illustrative example from the period covered by this paper is his paper "Fordism, Casino Capital and the Current Japanese Recession," first presented at the 1993 JSAC conference and published in 1995, by which time Sekine's

¹⁵ Daly often stayed at the International House of Japan in Minato-ku while in Tokyo. On one trip to Japan in the mid-1990s, Daly and I were escorted around Nagoya by the Sekines (Tom and Kazuko) visiting the Toyota Commemorative Museum of Industry and Technology, Nagoya Castle, and other sites.

academic affiliation had changed from the Department of Economics at York University to the School of Commerce at Aichi Gakuin University.

The paper examines the roots and nature of the 1991-93 Japanese recession and advances proposals for recovery. It is divided into sections on the 1) decline of Fordism, 2) advent of casino capital, and 3) state of the Japanese economy – October 1993. The last few pages of the third section deal with how the Japanese economy could recover.

The section on the decline of Fordism includes citations of economists associated with the Regulation School, who played a pivotal role in popularizing the concept of Fordism in academic discourse.¹⁶ But Sekine states that his definition of Fordism is different from theirs and is motivated by the MIT report on the automobile industry (Womack, Jones, and Roos 1990). This section also incorporates a large number of other disparate influences. Sekine employs the Marxian term “use values” once, quotes Adam Smith on human wants, references several mainstream works of empirical and descriptive economic history in English, and the institutionalist labour economist Koike (1988). He cites several Japanese sources, including Takasuka (1965), giving Takasuka credit for the fact that the “explanation of creeping inflation in terms of differential productivity between sectors consisting of large corporations equipped with advanced technology and the rest of the economy is fairly common in Japan.”¹⁷ (Sekine 1995: 193)

In the section on “The advent of casino capital,” Sekine does not reference the influential book *Casino Capitalism* (Strange 1986) that was instrumental in embedding terms such as “casino “capital” and "casino capitalism" in the lexicon of critical economic and political

¹⁶ The first usage of the term “Fordism” (“Fordismo” in the original) is attributed to Antonio Gramsci (1971).

¹⁷ I believe Yoshihiro Takasuka (1932-1991) was an old acquaintance of Sekine’s from their undergraduate days in the 1950s at Hitosubashi University. Takasuka has a Wikipedia page in Japanese and his contributions are discussed in section 3.3 of Uemura (2023). I was introduced to Takasuka and his graduate students by Sekine during my period in Japan during the 1980s as a graduate student affiliated with Tohoku University.

discourse. But he is clearly influenced by the wide body of literature on speculative finance and its destabilizing effects to which Strange's book belongs. The only references in the section are sources of statistical data including an international relations textbook and the *Financial Post*, a Canadian newspaper.

Finally, in the section on the state of the Japanese economy again cites a variety of sources of data, and he employs data on unit labour costs calculated by Donald J. Daly, three papers written by Daly on Japanese productivity and costs, and sources on capital stock per capita and per worker for which he thanks Daly (who was active in the International Association for Research on Income and Wealth).¹⁸ He has a footnote explaining the implications of the national income accounting identity between injections and leakages (to use the Keynesian parlance). His key source for understanding the nature of the Japanese recession is the previously-mentioned source Miyazaki (1992). In terms of recovery from the recession, Sekine (1995: 190) sees the need for a “new sunrise industry whose productivity is distinctly higher than that of conventional industries...”¹⁹ In connection with the concept of a sunrise industry, he cites an essay by Robert Heilbroner (1993) that refers to Edward Nell's concept of “transformational growth” and argues that a sunrise industry is the “one that ushers in transformational growth of the economy.” (Sekine 1995: 198). As an effective means for Japan to settle on a new sunrise industry, Sekine proposes a federalisation of the Japanese state. My hypothesis is that this proposal for federalisation, giving more power to local

¹⁸ In the acknowledgements for the paper, Sekine thanks Daly and Sekine's teaching assistant James Thiessen for their assistance and feedback.

¹⁹ I recall hearing a similar claim about the need for a sunrise industry from Satoru Yoshida (<https://100nenshi.musashi.jp/Gallery/Photo/6e7a7a74-2153-4a35-8b21-11a2b6e52da6>) in a directed readings course he kindly provided in the mid-1980s, not long after he joined Musashi University following many years as the chief economist for the Japanese Bankers Association.

decision-making, may reflect the influence on Sekine of the writings of the ecological economist Yoshiro Tamanoi (1918-1985).²⁰

In short, Sekine's "Fordism, Casino Capital and the Current Japanese Recession" shows that in his applied economic analysis, Sekine was open to combining a wide range of sources, both theoretical and empirical, to illuminate the issue at hand, and did not try to force a rigid theoretical framework on the historical record.²¹

Conclusion

This paper has focused on the period from the 1980s to the mid-1990s in an attempt to shed light on the lesser-known subject of Thomas T. Sekine's contributions to Japan studies in Canada, and the related issue of his intellectual flexibility or openness.

Sekine's teaching on the Japanese economy reflected his appreciation of the importance of empirical and descriptive historical analysis for enabling us to develop our own interpretations of events. His collaborations with Donald J. Daly, Keizo Nagatani, and others in JSAC exemplified his openness to new ideas and his belief in the value of interdisciplinary dialogue. His appreciation of Uchino, Daly, and Nagatani reflected his appreciation of knowledge of economic policy gained by relevant experience in government. His work of applied economic analysis, "Fordism, Casino Capital and the Current Japanese Recession," showed his intellectual flexibility.

²⁰ Like Sekine, Tamanoi was influenced by the ideas of Kozo Uno and those of Karl Polanyi.

²¹ Sekine (2013), with its considerable reliance on the analysis of the Post-Keynesian economists Hyman Minsky (1919–1996) and Jan Kregel, similarly shows Sekine's openness to ideas. It is, however, less eclectic than the 1995 paper I have described. This could be in part because, between the 1995 and the 2013 papers, Sekine felt he had reached a higher level of understanding of the current period of world economic history by studying the works of Mitsuhiro Takumi (1935-2004) and Minsky. <https://owlofminerva.net/sekine/marxs-economics-revived-part-ii/>

Sekine's capacity to absorb new ideas was likely in part due to his personal history. He lived mostly in Japan and Canada, but also in the United States and the United Kingdom. He studied and taught at a variety of universities with professors having very different theoretical orientations, and he had learned to understand mainstream economics as an insider.

But that capacity may also be related to two beliefs that I will mention in conclusion. One was the belief that the operation of the world economy had been less systematic, less governed by economic "laws", since WWI or, at the latest, since the Great Depression. The current period is one of ex-capitalist transition, and cannot be analyzed with the rigour with which one can analyze a purely capitalist economy.

The other was the belief, now much less common in the English-speaking countries than it once was, that scholars in the social sciences should avoid being ideologically one-sided and biased, but should instead strive for objective and universal truth.

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