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Beyond Self-Reliance: BioJapan Turns 40 by Asking Japan to Orchestrate

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On the opening day of the world's longest-running biotech exhibition, the programme at PACIFICO Yokohama converged on one question: how Japan turns world-class science into global deals, companies and medicines. Five threads defined Day 1, from the buyer's table to the bioreactor.

Yokohama, 7 October 2026 | BioJapan 2026, Regenerative Medicine JAPAN and healthTECH JAPAN, PACIFICO Yokohama, 7 to 9 October

Forty years after its first edition in 1986, BioJapan opened its 2026 edition at PACIFICO Yokohama on 7 October with an agenda that read less like an anniversary celebration and more like a national strategy session. The world's longest-running biotech exhibition runs through 9 October alongside its two co-located shows, Regenerative Medicine JAPAN and healthTECH JAPAN, and brings together more than 18,000 attendees and over 1,000 exhibiting companies, research centres and institutions across its three pillars of Exhibition, Seminars and Partnering.

Few industry gatherings anywhere can claim four decades of continuity. The milestone gives the organisers, the BioJapan Organizing Committee and JTB Communication Design, a natural platform to ask where the next forty years lead, and the opening day answered with remarkable consistency.

Across the Main Stage, the Japan Bioindustry Association (JBA) organiser rooms and more than a dozen sponsor and investment forum slots, one idea kept resurfacing: Japan's science is not the problem. The work now lies in everything that happens after discovery, which means partnering it, funding it, manufacturing it, proving it in patients and, increasingly, preventing disease before medicine is needed at all. The Alloy Therapeutics luncheon captured the mood best, framing the challenge as a move away from self-sufficiency toward "true orchestration" across organisational boundaries.

This report follows those five threads through Day 1: Orchestrate, Fund, Make, Prove and Prevent.

1. Orchestrate: the buyer's view of Japanese innovation

The day's flagship organiser session, held on the Main Stage from 13:00, went straight to the uncomfortable comparison. "Perspectives from Global Dealmakers: Bringing Japanese Innovation to Patients Worldwide" was built on a candid premise. China and South Korea are rising fast within the global biopharma ecosystem, and despite world-class science and research infrastructure, Japan trails its Asian peers in the number of major licensing and partnering deals emerging from its startups.

The session was designed to flip the usual pitch-room dynamic. Instead of founders presenting to buyers, the buyers explained how they evaluate. Koji Yashiro, Director of Pacific Business Development and Licensing at MSD, coordinated a line-up that included Tomoko Maeda, Head of R&D Alliance at Nippon Boehringer Ingelheim; Ken Fujimura, Lead, Global Business Development at Takeda; and Naohiko Aketa of argenx's Immunology Innovation Program. The agenda examined why Chinese and Korean startups have closed more transformative transactions, and what Japan should change or preserve across R&D strategy, intellectual property, data, financing and cross-sector collaboration. Delivered in Japanese, it spoke directly to the domestic researchers, founders and investors who must act on the answers.

Multinationals used their own slots to make the same case from the other side of the table. Merck Biopharma's 13:30 session, delivered entirely in English, placed "Japan at the center" of its partnering strategy. Representative Director and President Jeremy Grossas was joined by Matthias Müllenbeck, Senior Vice President and Head of Global Business Development and Alliance Management at Merck Healthcare; Shunichiro Mori, Head of R&D Japan; and Miho Yasuda, who leads business development and alliance management in Japan. The focus was on shaping deals that matter for patients both in Japan and globally.

Chugai Pharmaceutical, now in its 101st year, followed at 15:00 with "Connecting with Pioneers", setting out an expanded global partnering network under the banner of open innovation that is Japan-origin and globally driven. Yumiko Asano, Global Head of Chugai Partnering, was joined by Andrew Wong, Head of Chugai Partnering US; Futa Mimoto, CEO of Chugai Pharmabody Research; Matsuda Yutaka of the Search and Evaluation Group; and Talat Imran, CEO of Rani Therapeutics, who brought a partner's perspective on what collaboration with a Japanese major looks like in practice.

Alloy Therapeutics' luncheon pushed the orchestration argument furthest. Moderated by Victor Stone, CEO of Alloy Therapeutics Co., with Hanae Suzuki of JIC Venture Growth Investments, Shingo Arioka, Head of Investment Group at Shionogi, and Alloy's Chief Scientific Officer Yoshiaki Kassai, the panel asked what Japan's drug discovery ecosystem must do as Chinese biopharma advances clinical assets at remarkable speed. Its toolkit was concrete: faster first-in-human data, product development organisation (PDO) models, "Dejima" innovation carve-outs, build-to-buy structures, and talent that moves fluidly across pharma, venture capital and startups, generating new business and strategic returns as it does.

For a market that has historically prized in-house discovery, the shift in tone is striking. Day 1's partnering conversation was not about whether Japan should open up, but how quickly it can.

2. Fund: capital, geopolitics and the company-creation question

If partnering is the exit, capital is the engine, and Day 1's investment forums examined it from several angles.

AN Venture's 13:00 forum, held in English, tackled the geopolitical layer directly: how U.S. policy and the shifting U.S.-China relationship are reshaping biotech investment in Japan. Ken Horne, Managing Partner at AN Venture Partners, and John Stanford, Executive Director of Incubate Coalition, opened with U.S. most-favoured-nation drug pricing policy, changes surrounding the FDA, restrictions on China-related biotech investment and partnerships, and Japan's own drug pricing system. U.S. venture investors Marian Nakada, former Vice President at JJDC, Michael Gutbrod of Santé Ventures and Josh Resnick of RA Capital Management then turned to how geopolitics influences allocation decisions, how they view Japan as an investment market, and what is needed to expand investment in Japanese science. The subtext is an opportunity: as global capital reassesses its exposure elsewhere in Asia, Japan's case to international investors has rarely been more relevant.

Fast Track Initiative's 14:30 panel, "Accelerating the Globalization of Japanese Biotech", argued that building a global company takes far more than hiring internationally or opening an overseas office. It demands deliberate choices on strategy, leadership, governance, decision-making, culture and where capabilities sit. The panel paired operators with investors: Daniel Kemp, CEO of Shinobi Therapeutics; Johannes Fruehaus, Founding Partner of Mission Biocapital; Mark Noguchi, Advisor at Chugai; Hironoshin Nomura, CFO of Nxera Pharma; and Fast Track Initiative's Tai Harada and Natalie D'Amore.

Two sessions focused on how companies are born. LINK-J, marking its 10th anniversary, asked how "waves" of life science innovation emerge, placing company creation and venture creation at the centre of Japan's next chapter. Executive Director Shunichi Takahashi and Chairman Hideyuki Okano were joined by Yoshitsugu Shitaka, CEO of RealizeEdge Partners, and Takahiko Yano, Head of Drug Discovery at Ciconia Bioventures.

UTokyo Innovation Platform's annual portfolio session at 16:00 offered evidence that the model is working. Mark Ohori of UTokyo IPC hosted Ping Zhu, co-founder and CEO of CORE Biomedicine, where UTokyo IPC made a founding investment and later led global syndication; Frank Langston, SVP Strategy at Beren Therapeutics; and Yoichi Okumura, CEO of LiberoThera. The progress since last year's edition is substantial. Beren has announced a USD 300 million financing and completed a New Drug Application submission for its lead programme, while CORE Biomedicine closed a USD 21 million Series A this fiscal year. CORE and LiberoThera have both been selected for the matching fund of AMED's Drug Discovery Venture Ecosystem Strengthening Program (V-ECO).

Universities featured as originators in their own right. Kyoto University's session described an innovation ecosystem centred on a hospital that welcomes roughly 20,000 people every day, where routine clinical practice exposes the limits of existing treatments. Working with Kyoto University Innovation Capital (Kyoto-iCAP) and the university's Office of Growth Strategy, the model runs from identifying unmet clinical needs through technology assessment, startup creation, industry partnership and implementation. Its case study was Link Therapeutics, a startup that grew out of the hospital's gastroenterology practice, with contributions from Professor Seno Hiroshi, Clinical Lecturer Shiokawa Masahiro, Kyoto-iCAP's Tsuyoshi Tsujimura and Ueno Hiroyuki, Professor Suzuki Shinobu, and Kyoto-iCAP President and CEO Yagi Nobuhiro.

The JBA's 15:30 seminar, "From Clinical Trials to Investment Returns", tied the thread together. Investment in Japanese biotech startups has risen steadily, helped by government policy and corporate venture capital, yet the ecosystem that moves funded companies into the clinic remains underdeveloped. When programmes stall, capital fails to generate returns and the next investment cycle weakens. Coordinated by Daisuke Yoshizumi of JPMorgan Securities Japan, the speakers spanned the full chain: Toshihiko Doi, Director of National Cancer Center Hospital East; Yasuhiro Fujiwara, Chief Executive of the Pharmaceuticals and Medical Devices Agency (PMDA); Jonathan Hirsch, co-founder of Paradigm Health; and Achiwa Taku, Chief Development Officer of A-SEEDS. Having the regulator's chief executive on the programme, speaking on strengthening Japan as a preferred destination for clinical development, signals how seriously the country is treating its clinical competitiveness.

3. Make: the CDMO floor gets integrated

The sponsor programme showed manufacturing partners pitching integration rather than capacity alone, especially for complex modalities.

Samsung Biologics opened the seminar day with an 11:30 luncheon in two parts. James Choi, EVP, Chief Marketing Officer and Head of Sales Support, outlined how the company has expanded from early-stage technologies such as organoids and AAV into integrated ADC, peptide and automated pre-filled syringe services, supported by its Rockville campus in the U.S. and local collaboration through its Tokyo office. Yeonjeong Choi, Senior Scientist in the New Modality Group, then went into the engineering, presenting a computational fluid dynamics (CFD) approach to scaling ADC conjugation from small-scale runs into GMP manufacturing, with model design and a case study aimed at de-risking one of the most demanding steps in biologics scale-up.

ADCs were a recurring theme. WuXi XDC's 14:30 session argued that speed and quality in ADC development depend on orchestrating antibody discovery, linker-payload work, analytics, CMC, formulation, GMP and commercial manufacturing within a single platform. Masami Yokota, Senior Director and CMC Executive, and Jun Hu, VP, Head of XDC CEC and Singapore Site Management, focused on how that integration shortens timelines and on the company's expanding global capacity, framed around how Japanese science can be translated quickly into globally competitive medicines.

Cell line development took one of the luncheon slots. Toru Tsuji of Sartorius Stedim Japan and Judy Huang of Sartorius Stedim Taiwan presented a transition from the company's DG44 platform, behind more than 330 projects over 16 years with timelines as short as nine weeks from DNA to research cell bank, to genetically engineered CHO host cells used with the 4Cell SmartCHO media system for higher productivity at comparable stability. A partnership with CDMO Mycenax extends the offer from DNA through to GMP manufacturing and toward IND submission.

Advanced therapies drew a cluster of sessions, fitting for a show co-located with Regenerative Medicine JAPAN. Takara Bio's seminar featured Professor Uchiyama Susumu of The University of Osaka on the current status and future of AAV

vector manufacturing and quality characterisation for clinical use. ACROBiosystems' ZhenYu Hu addressed reproducibility in stem cell differentiation, arguing that rigorously characterised, quality-controlled reagents can stabilise processes and improve yield, functionality and cost. The Regenerative Medicine CDMO Subsidy Office then staged a Japan Cell and Gene Therapy CDMO Partnering Pitch featuring Cellafa Bioscience, U-Medico, Cuorips, Minaris Advanced Therapies, Nikon CeLL innovation, Japan Tissue Engineering (J-TEC), S-RACMO and Cyto-Facto, a visible statement that Japan's CGT manufacturing base is ready to compete for global programmes.

Antibody discovery rounded out the thread. Yurogen Biosystems CEO Lou Yang addressed bispecific antibody development using rabbit monoclonals, while Takeda's Tsuji Isamu presented work on serotype-specific anti-dengue monoclonal antibodies discovered through rabbit B cell sorting, aimed at a disease that causes an estimated 390 million infections each year.

4. Prove: data, AI and the evidence economy

The JBA's 13:30 seminar, "New Modalities x AI-Driven Drug Discovery", took a refreshingly pragmatic line. AI can strengthen the whole pipeline from target identification to process development, but only with high-quality data, iterative loops with experimental systems, interpretability, reproducibility and the right organisational infrastructure. Coordinated by Professor Shumpei Ishikawa of the National Cancer Center Japan and The University of Tokyo, the session heard from Ryu Ogawa, Chief Innovation Officer of MOLCURE, on AI-driven antibody discovery; Sohei Oyama of Chugai on the true value of AI beyond the hype from a pharma perspective; Masataka Hasegawa of FUJIFILM on inline Raman for a data-enabled CDMO; and Mizue Hisano of Genedata on AI-native antibody discovery.

Real-world data moved upstream into trial design. 4DIN's session, led by CEO Akihiko Takahashi, showed how its Real World Insight platform and 4DIN Research Network, built on electronic medical records from Japanese university hospitals, are being used to sharpen development decisions well before enrolment. Pilot case studies from Pfizer R&D Japan and Chugai covered optimising inclusion and exclusion criteria and visualising patient populations, with AI integration flagged as the next step.

Syneos Health brought the commercial lens. Its luncheon introduced the ART of Global Market Entry framework for weighing market selection, pricing and reimbursement, organisational design and development-to-commercialisation timelines, presented by Yunke Song, Keisuke Shiroyama and Qijun (QJ) He. The real-world anchor was Masuhiro (Max) Yoshitake, President and CEO of J-Pharma, a Japanese biotech that advanced a global development programme and completed an IPO.

Rare disease offered the sharpest test of whether evidence systems can keep pace with science. The JBA's 15:30 session, coordinated by Takeda's Yasushi Kajii, started from the gap between rapid technological progress and approval, reimbursement and business frameworks that were never designed for it. Professor Keiichiro Suzuki of The University of Osaka presented in vivo genome editing approaches (HITI and SATI) that restore gene function in non-dividing cells. Hiroya Kuwahara of the Institute of Science Tokyo addressed domestic implementation of N-of-1+ nucleic acid drug development. Yoshitsugu Aoki of the National Center of Neurology and Psychiatry traced oligonucleotide therapeutics for rare neuromuscular diseases from academic discovery to the clinic. McKinsey's Raymond Chan and Charles Soong made the market case for Japan's rare disease potential, and Daisuke Fujii of the Cabinet Office outlined government initiatives for personalised nucleic acid medicines for ultra-rare diseases.

5. Prevent: health before healthcare

The most forward-looking thread of the day reached beyond therapeutics altogether. The JBA's session on "Zero-Order Prevention" explored an emerging concept that complements primary and secondary prevention by shaping living environments, social conditions and behaviours before individual risk factors appear. Coordinated by Takuko Sawada, Vice-Chair of Shionogi and a JBA director, it brought together Professor Katsunori Kondo of Chiba University on environments where people become healthier naturally; Nobuhiko Horioka of the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare on primordial prevention in Health Japan 21 (Third Term); Yasuhisa Ano of Eisai on building a dementia ecosystem; and Professor Søren Brunak of the University of Copenhagen on early disease detection in an era of precision prevention, drawing on Denmark's data-driven practice.

The National Institute of Advanced Industrial Science and Technology (AIST) presented its Self-Care and Well-Being Implementation Research Centers, which aim to put evidence-based self-care technology in everyone's hands so each person can, in effect, become their own primary physician. Nobutaka Mitsuda moderated contributions from Kiyoshi

Yoshinaka, Tamio Tanikawa and Yoshiyuki Kobayashi, whose talk reframed health as a byproduct of daily movement rather than an effort.

Kanagawa Prefecture, co-organising with the Association for ME-BYO Industry, closed the seminar day with Governor Yuji Kuroiwa and Professor Masaya Nakamura reflecting on more than a decade of the ME-BYO concept, and on how data can connect individuals, healthcare and long-term care into a sustainable social system for an ageing society.

The bioeconomy reached past health too. A NEDO session on the future of textile recycling driven by biotechnology, with the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, the Research Institute of Innovative Technology for the Earth and TA FRONTIER, was a reminder that BioJapan's remit has always been broader than pharma.

The Day 1 verdict

Forty years in, BioJapan opened with a mix of confidence and urgency that suits the moment. The confidence comes from depth: a regulator engaging directly on clinical competitiveness, majors such as Chugai, Takeda and Merck actively scouting, a university spinout pipeline with real financings behind it, and a domestic CDMO base lining up for advanced therapy work. The urgency comes from the mirror held up by China and South Korea, whose dealmaking pace framed several of the day's most important conversations.

What stood out was how consistently the answer converged on collaboration across borders and organisations rather than a defensive strategy. Pharma, venture capital, universities, CDMOs and government spoke the same language of orchestration, and the partnering meetings running in parallel throughout the venue are where that language turns into term sheets.

BioSpectrum Asia continues its coverage from PACIFICO Yokohama through Day 2 and Day 3.