

Personal Reflections on the Reasons for Japan's Success

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Introduction

It may be difficult to agree on what constitutes a successful country or society. However, most human beings place a high value on personal safety and security. After that comes an adequate supply of food, clothing and shelter. These things we can call basic needs. Above the level of basic needs, many people want to live in a society which provides a good education system, an effective health service and a welfare system which protects them in times of financial stringency. They also want a political system which provides personal freedom and equality of opportunity to all citizens regardless of age, gender, race or class.

Although the 20th century was a time of tragedy including two devastating world wars and endless anti-colonial conflicts, it was also a period in which, for the first time in human history, some societies emerged which began to approach the levels defined above. For example, the Scandinavian countries are renowned for providing security and stability and a high standard of living. Unlike countries such the USA and the UK, they have also largely avoided involvement in wars for a lengthy period. Australia and New Zealand are in a similar position, although, being politically part of the 'West', they are sometimes dragged into international conflicts.

Very few countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America have been able to achieve a high standard of living for the majority of the population. The one exception that stands out clearly is Japan. I have lived in Japan for ten years, and, during that time, I have gained many insights into

Japanese society. These insights have been gleaned from reading, research, teaching, personal observation and social interaction with hundreds of Japanese people. In this article I would like to set out some of the reasons why I believe Japan is a successful country. This success includes not only a very powerful economy, but also a safe, stable and polite society and non-involvement in wars for a period of more than sixty years.

Japanese history

There are some distinctive features of Japanese history which I think are important in explaining why Japan has evolved into a successful society. From the early seventeenth century to the mid-nineteenth century, Japan was in a state of self-imposed isolation from most of the rest of the world. This was known as the Tokugawa or Edo period. One of the reasons for this isolation was that, from the 16th century onwards, the rulers of Japan became aware of the 'bible and the gun' philosophy of the leaders of the European nations. In one sense, Japan closed its doors in order to protect itself. That turned out to be a very wise decision because the period from the 16th to the 20th centuries turned out to be the first 'age of globalisation'. During that period an international morality developed which is difficult to believe today. It was an age of piracy and plunder in which European nations rampaged around the globe stealing vast tracts of land, committing genocide, occupying whole countries and territories and subjugating millions of people either directly to slavery or to widespread racism and economic injustice.

The behaviour and attitudes of the European and American ruling classes who perpetrated these crimes beggars belief in today's world where the occupation of even a small area of territory is usually condemned by the United Nations. However, it was the staggering arrogance and self-confidence of these criminals that created the modern world. And it is a world which is still very much with us today in Iraq,

Afghanistan and elsewhere. The mentality which suggests that the plunder and ownership of human and physical resources is of overriding importance still exists and continues to lead to numerous wars based on greed and the desire to control energy resources.

I believe that the Japanese people were fortunate that, during the Edo period, Japanese society evolved separately from the above imperialist and colonialist adventures. During that period Japan enjoyed peace and stability and was able to develop a unique set of social practices which still stand the country in good stead today. Japan is a country born out of adversity, not least because of its hostile physical environment. At any moment the country can be ravaged by earthquakes, typhoons or volcanic eruptions. Japan also has a very limited amount of flat land on which to grow food. During the Edo period, people had to learn to live together and cooperate out of necessity. The core of this cooperative activity was wet-rice cultivation. This is a type of agriculture which cannot survive unless people respect each other and work together to maintain very elaborate networks of dikes and drainage systems. It was out of this agrarian society that the Japanese system of 'groupness' developed. The Japanese also had to learn to help each other and work together on the numerous occasions when fires, earthquakes, typhoons and floods struck them down.

This feature of Japaneseness was nicely summed up by Smith in his essay on feudal Japan:

'Because rice must be made to stand in water much of the growing season to get maximum yields, there was need in nearly every village for an extensive system of ditches, dams, dykes, ponds, tunnels and water gates. Since these could be constructed and maintained only by community effort, their use was subject to community control. A rice farmer never owned or controlled all of the essential means of production himself, and he could not individually make all the critical decisions of farming. He might wish, for instance, to turn an unirrigated

field into paddy, but he would not be allowed to do so if this would impair the water supply of others. The habit of obedience to community opinion where water was concerned likewise carried over to other community affairs since any serious breach of solidarity directly threatened the communal foundations of farming' (Smith 1995 p.31)

In my view the Japanese people were also fortunate to be spared the imposition of so-called 'European civilisation'. Almost all of the rest of the world was subjected to a European philosophy which combined aggression with superstition – the bible and the gun referred to above. When the Europeans arrived in Latin America, Africa or Asia they often literally forced the local people to submit to 'christianity' or they threatened them with violence and coercion. Examples are almost too numerous to mention, but some extreme cases of violence and even genocide included the Incas, Aztecs and Tasmanian aborigines. These activities have had a deep and lasting effect on the local peoples, many of whom, although they were essentially victims, became infected with the European world view.

Japan, in contrast, developed a society based on a combination of relatively peaceful animistic and Buddhist beliefs. Japanese people rejected the aggressive political religions such as christianity and islam and managed to avoid the internal sectarian strife which the leaders of these religions seem so adept at creating. Japanese technology also evolved to a very high level during the Edo period. Methods of building houses and machines grew up in a uniquely Japanese setting thus creating a tradition of craftsmanship which stood the country in good stead when its industrial revolution arrived in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Japan's 'dark ages' occurred in the mid-twentieth century. In one sense this happened because of a strong Japanese proclivity to learn from

others. It was also totally out of character, for, unlike the UK, Japan had almost no history of external aggression. However, when Japan began to industrialise in the late nineteenth century, it soon became apparent, that current international morality decreed that imperialism, militarism and industrialisation were all part of one inseparable package. The Europeans had been doing it for centuries, and, furthermore, in order to obtain the vital resources for these adventures, they had stolen and occupied most of the territories on Japan's doorstep. Inevitably, some powerful, militaristic leaders in Japan wanted to follow suit and the country engaged in disastrous wars of aggression in East and South East Asia. The result was a global holocaust during which, physically, Japan was severely damaged.

This point is supported by Megarry when he argues that:

'The attainment of an industrially-based economy by European countries was frequently accompanied by the desire for Great Power status. The lesson that these aspirations could be realized by imperialist expansion was rapidly assimilated by the Japanese modernizers who swiftly learned that in the late nineteenth century force paid dividends' (Megarry 1995 p231)

Along with the Edo period, I believe it is the period since World War Two that has made Japan the successful society that it is today. Ironically, after that war, Japan was occupied for the only time in its history. Remnants of a feudal past were removed by the Americans, and a peace constitution was imposed which has proved beneficial to the evolution of Japanese society. Japan was able to rise quickly from the ashes of the war largely because of the strong social, economic and technological infrastructure inherited from the pre-war period. However, the peace constitution also helped to release resources and human energies which have been devoted to peaceful economic development. The absence of a culture of aggressive military forces is a striking feature of modern

Japanese society. It is also a significant contrast with the United States. One of the first things that foreigners living in Japan notice is the absence of a young, male, macho culture. This undoubtedly sets the tone for the whole society which has markedly lower crime rates than most of the other industrialized countries in the world.

Since World War Two Japan has emerged as one of the greatest success stories amongst the countries of the world. By 1990 dramatic economic growth and technological innovation had catapulted the country into a position as the second largest economy in the world, a status it has held every since. However, the evolution of Japanese society has confounded many Western social scientists. In other advanced, industrialized countries rapid economic growth has usually been accompanied by a dramatic increase in social dislocation and alienation resulting in higher crime rates and less personal security. This has not happened in Japan to anything like the degree that it has occurred elsewhere. In fact, most people who have lived in Japan regard it as the safest country in the world. It is very common for foreigners to experience something such as the loss of a purse or wallet only to find that it has immediately been handed in to the nearest police station. It is also amazing to see the Japanese leaving their bags unattended in public places without the slightest concern or fear of theft.

Japanese society

How has this extraordinary society emerged? The above historical experiences provide part of the explanation, but the positive social practices developed in the past have to be reproduced in order to maintain a civilised society. In Japan this is achieved in several ways. Firstly, the family is very important as an agent of socialization. The deeply inbred traditions of politeness and respect for others are transmitted to children at a very early age. I have observed the way that even infants and young children are trained by their parents to bow

courteously and defer to others in a variety of social situations. The extended family is also still very important in Japan. Thus children get used to living in a household with both parents and grandparents. They learn to respect the age and experience of elderly people.

The above habits are also reinforced when Japanese children enter the education system. Teachers constantly stress the need to be polite and respect others and children are also taught to take responsibility for their own lives. Thus Japanese primary school children can often be seen serving the school lunches or cleaning the corridors and classrooms. This is unheard of in countries like the United Kingdom. The importance of the group is also stressed in the education system and children are taught to work together. Teachers also play a major role in the lives of school children and university students. This applies to behaviour and activities outside of the school as well as inside. For example, it is commonplace in Japan for a person's teacher to be invited to their wedding. This is in great contrast to many Western countries where people often forget about their teachers soon after leaving school.

Hendry has emphasized the above points when she discussed the great importance of harmony in Japanese social relations:

'Much of an adult's training of children is based on the assumption that one should work towards this ideal (of harmony). Thus, from the very beginning, one should try to maintain a congenial atmosphere with a small child, teaching it the proper way to behave for the sake of behaving properly, rather than for praise or to avoid punishment' (Hendry 2003 p 50)

I mentioned above the peace constitution which was imposed on Japan during the American occupation from 1945 to 1952. This legislation made it illegal for Japan to engage in military action outside of its own borders. Japan was allowed to build up its armed services, but these

were given the name of 'Self-Defence Forces'. I believe that the peace constitution and the absence of foreign military adventures has had a profound effect on the development of Japanese society. During the last sixty years many of the other advanced industrialized countries have been involved in almost continuous military activities outside of their own borders. This is particularly true of the United States and the United Kingdom. Both of these countries seem to feel that it is their duty to act as the world's policeman. They are happy to intervene in any country which has the energy resources they crave. This has sometimes resulted in unforeseen and diabolical consequences as in the present Iraq conflict. They also display breathtaking hypocrisy over the issue of nuclear weapons. Having amassed thousands of these Weapons of Mass Destruction themselves, they constantly seek to mobilize a mythical entity called the 'International community' to prevent other countries obtaining them.

Japan has escaped all of this by virtue of being the only country which has actually suffered from nuclear weapons and because of its peace constitution. There is no pressure on young Japanese people to join the armed forces and no fear of being sent overseas to defend the interests of the ruling classes. I believe that this creates a social atmosphere in Japan which is very different to that of the United States. Gangs of aggressive young males which threaten local populations are a rarity in Japan and this contributes to the general feeling of safety and security. Young men do not have role models in the armed forces which stress aggression and macho behaviour. Rather, Japanese popular culture tends to encourage the gentle and effeminate male, something that would probably be deplored in the West. It is probably no accident that David Beckham, a sports superstar who cultivates his feminine side, became extremely popular in Japan.

The absence of class?

Another reason why Japan is a safe and successful country is the absence of a strongly developed sense of class consciousness. This is in stark contrast to the UK. Of course Japan does have a class system if class is measured in terms of income differentials. The presidents of large companies living in expensive areas of Tokyo have a totally different lifestyle to a poor worker in a small town. On the other hand, the UK's feudal-style class system where there is a large and thriving aristocracy, is largely absent in Japan. The old samurai class was effectively abolished by the Americans during the occupation and the Japanese monarchy is largely symbolic compared with the British one. Another huge difference is that many Japanese towns and cities still have very mixed housing areas. It is quite common to see expensive houses next to old and cheap blocks of flats. In short, the system of strongly marked social areas based on class which is prevalent in the UK, is much less developed in Japan.

All of the above leads to many Japanese claiming that 'we are all middle class'. Whilst this is clearly not accurate, it does represent a feeling that all Japanese are members of one large group which is not deeply split into social classes. Another way in which this feeling is reinforced is by the behaviour of different groups in the workplace. I have visited many Japanese factories and my experience reflects the views of many foreigners who have done the same. The old British tradition of a total separation of workers and management is largely absent in Japan. In fact when one enters a factory it is often difficult to tell who are the workers and who are the managers because all of them are wearing the same uniform. They also tend to eat in the same canteen and use the same car park. Statistics also reveal that income differentials between senior managers and average workers are much less in Japan than in the United States or the U.K. This inevitably leads to a greater sense of social cohesion and the relative absence of class envy.

The traditional values developed in Japanese history which are reinforced in the family, the education system and the workplace seem to ensure that, on a daily basis, Japanese people show a great deal of respect for each other. This is, of course, exhibited in the world-renowned Japanese practice of politeness. Japanese are invariably polite and courteous to others and will go to extraordinary lengths to put themselves out and help other people. Again the experiences of foreigners are legion. In one recent example, a friend of mine from the UK was looking for a bank where she could withdraw cash using her credit card. The location was a small town at the foot of Mount Fuji. She couldn't speak any Japanese, so she was somewhat at a loss. Getting desperate she walked into a chemist's shop and tried to ask for advice. Within no time, the pharmacist had temporarily closed the shop and driven her across town to a cash point. Another example reinforces the point. I sometimes cannot find the exact product I would like to purchase in a supermarket. If I ask an assistant, it is commonplace for her to run across the floor and run back with the required item, accompanied of course by a bow and a smile.

The Japanese service industry is legendary and extends to all aspects of life. Living in Japan, one comes to expect a very high standard of service whether it be in a restaurant, hotel, department store or other public facility. This even extends to local government services which are notoriously weak in some other countries. Because I have a young family, I often have to visit the local city hall in Beppu. I have to enquire about many things including education, health and foreigner registration. However, whenever I have been to the city hall I have never had to queue or wait for more than a few minutes. I am always treated with great courtesy and my business is concluded speedily and efficiently. This certainly takes all the stress out of dealing with local council officials. Unfortunately this is not an experience that I have often had in the UK.

Is Japan a paradise?

Does all of the above lead me to conclude that Japan is a paradise? It certainly is a very comfortable and civilised place to live, but of course I am aware of the fact that Japan, like any country, has a 'dark side'. There are many important issues in Japanese society which still need to be resolved. There is still an ultra-rightist fringe in Japanese politics which occasionally resorts to violence when sacred symbols such as the Emperor are criticized. The Japanese workplace is still far more sexist than in the United States and opportunities for women to reach high management positions are relatively few. Corruption is probably widespread in certain sectors, for example in the form of 'kickbacks' between local and national government officials and construction companies. Organized crime in the form of the 'yakuza' is still deeply entrenched. In the minds of some Japanese these gangsters seem to take on an almost mythical or romantic status. Discrimination against minority castes and ethnic groups such as the 'Burakumin' and the Koreans still exists. Compared with Europe, the Japanese have largely failed in urban planning. Most of the towns and cities in Japan are ugly and all look the same. In many urban centres vast 'pachinko' parlours dominate the landscape and take up massive areas of land which could be developed for more socially useful purposes such as parks or housing. Bullying in schools seems to be a serious problem and there have been many cases in which it has resulted in the suicides of pupils.

Japan is often severely criticized by its neighbours in the field of foreign affairs. The main bone of contention seems to be that, since World War Two, various Japanese governments have not apologized enough for the atrocities committed by Japanese troops in the war and that Japanese school textbooks do not reflect the view of history held by the South Korean, North Korean or Chinese governments. From a British point of view this debate is somewhat strange and surprising. As I said at the beginning of this article, the historical record of the Europeans and

especially the British in terms of the invasion and conquest of other countries, is truly appalling. Yet, as far as I am aware, most of the European nations have still failed to apologise for the numerous crimes committed under the auspices of colonialism. Those crimes are much more widespread and have left a much more lasting and pernicious legacy than anything done by the Japanese. In fact, Japan's foreign affairs record in the last sixty years is excellent. Not only has Japan not been involved in any foreign wars, but it is also a very major aid donor especially in Asia and a major contributor to the United Nations. In fact, as the second largest economy in the world, Japan's international behaviour is impressive. It is probably the first time in world history that a country that is very powerful economically has not translated that power into some type of aggression against other countries.

When the Roman ruling class became rich, they translated their wealth into military power. The British ruling class did the same from the seventeenth century onwards. Both of these small countries created vast foreign empires. These days, the United Nations frowns upon overt foreign conquest, but the United States is not far behind Rome and Britain in terms of its interference, often military, in all corners of the globe. Only Japan, despite its vast wealth, has refrained from translating its power into modern-day imperialism. This is surely good for Japanese society as the ordinary citizens will inevitably be influenced by the activities of their government.

Conclusion

Japan is made up of fallible human beings just like any other country. As a society it therefore has faults and weaknesses. However, I believe that Japan has substantial strengths as a society which need to be clearly understood and appreciated in a wider world. As citizens of the globe we need to learn from the Japanese experience. Foremost amongst these lessons is the very high degree of civility that most Japanese people

show to each other and to foreigners. Secondly, there is the fact that, despite its wealth and highly advanced industrialization, Japan remains a very safe country, probably the safest in the world.

Japan has succeeded in the company and the workplace where many others have failed. This is due to a high degree of perfectionism and dedication to the job at all levels, a reflection of Japan's underlying value system. It is impossible to understand the dramatic success of a company like Toyota without deep insights into the culture in which it is embedded. Another factor is the absence of military aggression overseas for more than sixty years. This is guaranteed by the peace constitution and has ensured that the Japanese have devoted their energies to the peaceful development of their society and the world.

Japanese people are very well off by international standards. They have almost everything they need, and, in one sense, Japan is a world unto itself. On the other hand Japanese companies and Japanese tourists are everywhere in the world, so the Japanese can hardly be accused of being insular. Despite its faults, Japanese society provides a model which many other countries would do well to follow. I, for one, feel privileged to have had the opportunity to enjoy living here for an extended period. It has taught me much and made me reflect on other societies and cultures. Hopefully I have learned something which I can apply in practice wherever I choose to live in the future.

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