

Two Decades Forward

A Western's View of Recent Changes in Japan

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In 1991 when we lived for six months in Nagoya, Japan, the country was still on a roll that had been building for decades. Spending and rampant consumerism was at an all time high and the young adult generation was most conspicuous of all – with fast cars and motor cycles, elaborate weddings, entertainments, clothes and travel; it looked as if the good times were there to stay. An example of over-the-top consumerism I always loved was the little sachets of gold-leaf or crushed pearls served at very expensive afternoon tea; sprinkled onto the surface of the tea they glittered and shone without adding anything to the flavor, but a lot to the fun and ambiance. By year's end the bubble had burst and the country started into two and a half decades of recession and stagnation.

Now in November 2017 we were back again in Nagoya for three weeks. Though we had returned to the country a number of times in the interim, packed schedules of meetings and fast, highly orchestrated trips from one city to another, had left little time for observation. This latest invitation to spend three weeks at the University of Nagoya was more relaxed; we met a wider range of people and experienced a slower pace more conducive to reflection. November is a wonderful time to visit Japan with cool, dry, crisp weather, and the most wonderful colors in the trees, particularly the vivid gold of the Ginkgoes and the orange and reds of the Momiji.

Immediately on arrival I was aware of a difference; an un-crowded airport, a less hectic pace of downtown traffic and fewer people on the streets, subway and train stations. A general absence of the frantic hurry and urgency that had epitomized Japan for me for so long, though rush hours are still very crowded.

Japan has a population of 127 million crowded onto a group of islands that together are the size of Montana but with only twenty-five percent of its land surface inhabited or under cultivation; the rest is volcanic mountains not conducive to urban or rural living. Crowding is and always has been the name of the game and space, private, commercial and public, is at a premium. The intrinsic nature of the population has been influenced by centuries of need for all to respect the personal space of others in order that theirs be respected in return.

It was, therefore, strange to find not only in Nagoya but also in Tokyo, Osaka and Kobe, streets not overly crowded with traffic, and train and subway platforms not the seething masses they used to be. Gradually I observed and learnt of a number of issues that explain some of this phenomenon.

First and foremost is a very well recognized declining population that with a birthrate that is no longer replacing itself. In a xenophobic country where imported labor is not welcomed, the government has in the past two decades successfully sought to encourage young married women back into a workplace they have

traditionally left with marriage and motherhood. It has also enticed an increasing number of older women to join it too. Therefore, streets, shops, department stores and supermarkets are un-crowded during working hours.

This ongoing decrease in population is also reflected in long-term government planning as for instance with new and replacement buildings, which are systematically being downsized. The director of a 600-bed psychiatric hospital built in the eighties and about to be replaced with a new facility, told us that he could only obtain construction permission with the commitment to a downsized to a 400-bed facility, to adjust to the anticipated demands of a smaller population. This is just one example of the Government led rationalization that is taking place across many aspects of the Japanese workplace and institutions.

Secondly the absolutely amazing efficiency and frequency of mass transit whips people off station and subway platforms before crowds can amass. If you miss one train another will present within a very short space of time, though the Japanese don't seem to miss their trains; they arrive within minutes and sometimes seconds of departure and do not stand around crowding platforms. We, unused to split-second timing and in fear of getting on the wrong train, always arrived at least fifteen minutes ahead of time, giving us ample opportunity to find our platform and once there observe the habits of others.

Lifestyles have been greatly influenced by the changing attitudes of the young adult population of the past twenty-five years, the Millennials, or Lost Generation as they are sometime called in Japan, and the up and coming Generation Z. Disillusionment in the nineties soared as the economic downturn found fathers and mostly male family members losing jobs in a workplace that had always, in modern Japan, rewarded company loyalty for lifetime guaranteed employment security. Suicide, which has a long accepted history in the culture, became a common coping mechanism for mid-life and older men facing the shame and stigma of unemployment.

Others left for their work in smartly pressed suits and with bulging briefcases, only to spend the day sitting in the park or a subway station, unable to admit to their families that they were no longer employed.

Many young people exiting university in those years and since, passed up the traditional automatic entry into the cogs of corporate life to become "Freeters" - a combination of the English word "freelance" and the German "arbeiter," a word commonly used in Japan for second jobs and temporary work. These "irregular" part-time workers now make up an unprecedented 40% of the Japanese workforce. This presents enormous problems for the Government by further reducing the birthrate: young people with low, part-time wages do not marry and have children, nor do they systematically pay into the social security system currently supporting an ever-increasing aging population.

As a result, today, with the economy in recovery, companies can no longer rely on an unending stream of young workers eager to fill positions that do not offer lifelong security. Disillusioned with long hours, unpaid overtime and tough working conditions, many of those who do sign on to corporate life, leave after a year or two.

New State regulations are currently being implemented to ban the long-time practice of forced and unpaid overtime that has been endemic in the Japanese workplace. But, as the skepticism of the Millennials changes the workplace it changes them too.

The young salaryman of the seventies and eighties, moving from education to corporation, to marriage and children; the man who spent company sponsored evenings in bars and restaurants with co-workers, bar girls and second parties; arriving home late and sleeping all weekend, is no more as the recession cut back enormously on work related entertainment expenditure. With job loss a distinct possibility for many as companies continue to retrench, downsize and rationalize their workforce, the need to reduce personal expenses and increase savings for a less certain future has become the focus for young families.

Big flashy cars are out and public transport in. The latest model appliances, introduced mid-year at the time of the summer bonus, are no longer the absolute necessity they once were in order to show social status. The days of the one-year-old appliance cast out in the garbage in mid-summer when replaced by a newer model, has disappeared as today multi-floored second-hand emporiums flourish, selling everything from washing machines to designer clothes and shoes.

In a country where in the second half of the 20th century the ability to purchase exclusive, expensive brands was a mark of success and spurred an enormous mass-luxury market, the acceptance of buying used items is astonishing. It is all part of the desire for more value for money; for company brands, the Internet, big box stores like Wal-Mart and Costco, and even the second-hand shops, that is truly amazing. Despite exceptionally small living spaces the lure of savings with Costco toilet rolls and paper towels stacks hallways and entrances of many homes. A number of women eagerly asked me during this trip, whether I shopped at Costco and how often? For them it is a special occasion when they band together and car-pool to the outskirts of the big cities to buy large packs of goods to split up among them. They love it.

Even the notorious Japanese sex industry has been affected by the changing fortunes of corporate life, the new Millennium lifestyle and the growing ageing population. With 28% of Japanese over 65, the highest proportion in the world, “soft sex” services are more in demand. Less carnal they include massages and soap scrubs, home delivery, maid and cuddle cafes, and of course the usual strip clubs and pornography.

Because the sex industry in general is more culturally accepted in Japan than elsewhere around the world, it continues to expand with creative new services to meet the changing demands age and expenditure make upon it.

Much has changed on the home front also as younger men spend more time with their families, citing reading and the Internet as their most favorite leisure occupations. Today husbands actually help with running the house, with children, homework, extra curricular classes and weekend outings, and increasingly so as more married women go out to work. These modern-day families are called “sugomori” translating as “chicks in the nest.” Some businessmen even take their lunch to work and are known as “bento-danshi” - “lunch-box men,” eating at their desks to save money.

Families eating out in restaurants for convenience and regardless of expense now have more meals made in the home, and home entertaining has become fashionable. In the past, being invited to a Japanese home for a meal was unusual, now it is part of the new Japan. As a result this has changed the supermarkets, which were always wonderful, but are now even more of a delight, filled with the most amazing array of prepared and semi-prepared foods to service the new lifestyle

Department stores, long the arbiters of every latest fashion from clothing and housewares to old master paintings, have experienced a decline in activity as Millennials and Generation Z resort to the Internet. A gift wrapped in the distinctive paper of a department store always indicated discrimination, extravagance and taste; today now more frugal internet purchases come wrapped in unidentifiable papers.

The traditional “Nappaku,” a term applied to the very formalized thank-you system of gift giving in Japan, is fading. The primary gifting occasions were “Oseibo” at New Year and “Chugen” in mid -summer, coincidental with twice-yearly bonuses, and involving not just family members but superiors, subordinates, and business contacts within the workplace. Today companies actively discourage this practice among co-workers, and families have replaced “Oseibo” with Christmas, making presents more personal and less obligatory.

Many years ago when asking a former Fellow of my husband’s what he found most difficult on his return to Japan after six years in the United States, he said without hesitation, obligation. The obligations of inferior to superior and vice versa, the need to always select the correct gift at the correct price for the person or occasion, and the need to appropriately recognize each and every element of gratitude, appreciation and indebtedness to others: the workplace, clients, contacts, marriages, deaths, the traditional holidays and family events.

Even a trip out of town requires an “omiyagi” - a gift or souvenir specifically for co-workers, usually edible and distinctive to the part of the country visited. During our long stay in Japan in 1991, that involved a lot of travel around the country, my husband thought he was saving us trouble by buying the omiyagi for the Lab at Nagoya train station on our return. Until, that is, he was quietly told that the very nature of the gift indicated from whence it came, each town and city in the country having some food specialty specific to the region. On this trip I noticed specifically named “omiyagi” stores, which we found them very useful when needing gifts for the lab. On one visit to Washi Island in the Inland Sea, known for its production of onions, we bought a large “omiyagi: of sweet onions, that were dutifully divided up among the lab workers.

Gift giving in Japan has a very old history. For centuries, before the rise of the big cities, the rural population was exceedingly poor. Strangely it was the farmers and fishermen, who though higher in the social order than the merchants and the lowly leather-tanning Eta, were the poorest. Caught between the Feudal Lords, the Daimyos, to whom they owed allegiance and a percentage of their production, and the merchants who purchased their excess, if any, the farmers and fishermen lived a very meager existence. Thus, when there was a birth, marriage, death or celebration in a family, it was customary for villagers to give a present of food or money fancifully wrapped and tied up in a piece of fancifully patterned cloth called a furoski, the intention being to help defray the expense of the relevant event. In due course the recipient family would return a gift at half the cost of that they had received, wrapped up in the same furoshki.

Today this system still persists at weddings and funerals where bank machines are now available at reception desks and young women record checks and cash donations at the sign in table. Usually some months after the event a cost-appropriate gift is returned, though in the case of marriages the gifts are often given at the actual celebration, but this too is changing.

The six, eight or even ten items in the traditional wedding furoski is perhaps today just one, or maybe a gift card or voucher of some sort. It was commonplace back in the “good days” to see departing wedding guests leaving hotels, on station platforms and in subways, carting off enormous furoskis of “loot”. Several friends of ours used to have special cupboards in their homes where they kept these excess gifts ready for re-gifting. I have received a number of such re-gifts over the years, they are very easy to recognize: tea sets, vases, clocks, various types of plates and bowls, desk sets etc.

Having been in Japan in November and December on several occasions, I have learnt that actually it is perhaps the best time of year to visit because it is dry, not too cold, and usually sunny. Thus since my initial visit in 1980 I have seen Christmas grow into a massive marketing exercise of music, Santas and every reindeer, elf and Christmas tree element imaginable. This last visit, which spanned Thanksgiving and into

December, I found the decorations lower key, more tasteful and less excessive, again reflecting diminished over-the-top consumerism. It was as if the country had stepped back a little, adjusted to lower expenditures on every front; that the twenty-year plus recession had prompted the population to reassess its priorities and, led by the less materialistic Millennials, change the habits of decades to follow a more family friendly, value orientated lifestyle. For a population that saw its savings diminish during the country's banking crisis and negative interest rates for many subsequent years, the changes are indeed understandable.

Weddings are often smaller and less elaborate too. A Japanese wedding used to start at the Shrine with the bride and groom in traditional dress that used to be bought but increasingly over the years rented. They would then change into an elaborate Western style white wedding dress and tuxedo, also now rented, for a sort of Western style ceremony in a chapel.

Our Nagoya hotel on this trip was so popular for weddings that it had it's own chapel. We could see it from our window and we enjoyed the recorded choral music that emanated from it – the same music for each celebration of the production-line weddings taking place there at weekends. Finally the bride changes into a formal ball-gown and her groom into tails for the evening party. All this costs an amazing amount of money.

Today many young couple either drop a dress change, sadly often the traditional one, or opt for a destination wedding with just a few family and friends, all paying their own costs. Several years go when in Florence one very cold January I saw what looked like a comedy of a Japanese destination wedding. As I stood in the doorway of the Baptistery waiting to meet a friend for lunch, a young Japanese couple in full white wedding dress and tails, posed in the freezing wind for their *de rigueur* wedding photos and video. Alone except for the photographer, they shivered on the steps of the Duomo turning this way and that to create the images of “the dream wedding in Italy” that no doubt still grace their bookshelf, and will for decades to come. The bride's dress was very creased, having probably been taken out of its suitcase only hours before, and the wind blew the groom's carefully coiffed hair and her veil unmercifully.

Perhaps they had not realized that Florence in winter is actually very cold and not the glowing Italian sunshine we usually associate with the country. But destination weddings are considerably cheaper, and there is no need for gifts to buy to fill up the guests' *furoshkis*.

Being entertained at restaurants was another area of distinct change. In three weeks we had very few of the long elaborate banquet-style dinners of former visits, with multiple, small, exquisite courses of traditional foods, seated on the Tatami in elegant surroundings in front of pristine Japanese gardens. Instead there were dinners in less expensive restaurants serving one type specialty dishes such as crab, eel, tofu, noodles, *fugu* – the deadly Japanese blow fish, which actually is not inexpensive. Foreign food is currently in, with French being the most fashionable. We had six French dinners in three weeks, four of which were French/Japanese style, and two were authentic Bistro type food.

One of the French/Japanese style restaurants served only one table per evening for a maximum of eight diners – with a three month advanced reservation. The owner, chef, sommelier, waiter and bus boy were all rolled into the one man, who was so happy with his creations that he stood unobtrusively to the side watching us enjoy his amazingly wonderful food.

The French restaurant at the Ritz in Osaka was a complete contrast where amid an excess of heavily paneled rooms hung with elegant paintings and prints, an army of waiters and helpers of various levels, provided a menu that kept me awake much of the subsequent night. *Fois gras* is omnipresent in French restaurants, in supermarket creations and even Kobe Beef restaurants in Japan today. Global goose liver production must have increased enormously as a result of this explosion of demand.

We ate at Italian restaurants, a little less expensive but extremely popular, the fast food noodle chains, which were great fun; a Michelin rated Kobe Beef establishment in Kobe; soba noodles in the Japanese Alps, an amazing luncheon in a beautifully restored traditional family home in Matsumoto with every conceivable traditional dish cooked by the lady of the house, all of which had to be tried despite the rather large hotel breakfast only a few hours earlier. We sampled top-of-the-line sushi bars with our longtime friend and gourmet, Yoshi, and had lobster sushi for the first time with Junta and Tomoko in Takatsuki-city. But the most charming meal of all was a pot au feu lovingly prepared at home by Yukari the wife of one of my husband's former Fellows.

Everywhere the food was wonderful and though not as extravagantly expensive and elaborate as on former visits, was in fact much more enjoyable and varied. Again the sense of value for money was everywhere apparent and there was less over-the-top display.

These are just some of the things I observed during our recent trip, things that seem to have rendered Japanese life more pleasant and harmonious. I was surprised to learn that employees in the public sector have to fill out forms twice yearly about their stress levels at work; its causes, how it could be remedied, hours and overtime worked, and a number of other factors that affect quality of life.

The Government is currently encouraging the private sector to follow this lead and also to encourage its workers to go home at five o'clock; in the past most stayed until seven, eight or nine o'clock. I used to say that Japan had a high standard of living but a low quality of life. This seems to be changing as a result of a prolonged recession that replaced lifetime security in the workplace with a rapid rise in part-time employment, increased female participation in workforce, and perhaps most of all generated a non-materialistic attitude in Millennials and Generation Z.

These younger generations seem to want a less stressed, regimented way of life. They want to work to be able to live a comfortable life rather than live to work to show social status as their parents and grandparents often did. I think they are succeeding; Japan is a more comfortable, more relaxed place to visit these days and the young Japanese appear to be happy in their new but as yet still only slightly less stressed, but definitely less materialistic lives.