

How to Overcome Stereotype Images of Japan

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How to Overcome Stereotype Images of Japan

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Few other countries suffer as much from stereotype images abroad as Japan, and it has become a major task not only for the country's still infant cultural diplomacy, but also her international trade policy to help foreigners overcome prejudices¹ from anecdotal half-truths and rather enlighten them by providing clear and up-to-date facts on things Japanese. Present societal changes in Japan have brought an additional urgency to this task of objective information.

It is general knowledge that the Tokugawa Shogunate adopted a policy of seclusion (*sakoku*) over a period of more than two hundred years until the middle of the 19th century by keeping Christian missionaries and — but not so much — traders out of Japan as well as prohibiting the Japanese to leave their country.² Only few exceptions were granted, and quite a few people in the West view this period as an important, if not unique experience in history which is said to have profoundly influenced the Japanese mind for generations. One element which of course has only rendered possible the implementation of such policy at the time is the geological fact of Japan being an island. However, Japan never built a "Great Wall" like China. . .

Of course, there are other islands nations, but none has succeeded over such a long period of time in closing hermetically to a similar degree. Therefore, many people are tempted to associate the claimed introversion of the Japanese society and in particular its economy with the historical experience of *sakoku* under the Tokugawa Shogunate.

Certainly this is not the only stereotype perception of Japan that has grown out of generalisations and exaggerations of merely superficial knowledge. Even more ignorance is displayed by many Westerners on the role of Japanese ladies in their society. Looking back to the early days of history or even mythology of the archipelago, as a European one has to be surprised by the eminent role played by women. Starting with the goddess Amaterasu Omikami, one of the very few female deities recorded in the world, but also in the secular ruling elite of early Japan we find evidence of a rather women-centered culture which is still surviving in several female functions of Shintoism such as shrine-maidens Miko (i.e. *shamanaess*) and even woman-priests *Kannushi*. It is remarkable that it was the introduction of Buddhism and Confucianism from the continent that brought about a shift away from the rather matriarchal Japanese traditions for the first time with the Taika Reform of the 7th century³. However, much more surprising to most foreigners is the historical fact that the

importation of European legal codes beginning in the Meiji period has contributed also to reducing the traditional privileges of women, in the name of equality!

Many a foreign visitor — still associating Japanese ladies with the image of geisha — nowadays reacts with astonishment when seeing men and women working side by side on road constructions. However, their physical strain of equality at the working place is much less brutalizing than their female ancestors coal-mining still in the 1920's almost naked (because of the heat) together with their male co-workers⁴.

Particularly difficult is the issue of Japan seen as a closed market, since it has become highly political as considerable economic interests are directly at stake. Hence, objective and balanced information to clean up pure anecdotes which give proof to only one or the other generalising "argument" are in dire need. Starting from the principle of comparative advantage in international economic exchanges that underlies the multilateral trade agreements, recently significant advances in clarifying the issue were reported.

One of Japan's major banks in the summer of 1994 published a report on an international comparison of Japan's import barriers⁵ and thus greatly contributed to further defusing the issue. However, in order to overcome the image of one-sidedness, cooperative studies with foreigners concerned can eliminate later controversies already from the very outset. To this end, Japan agreed with the European Community in January 1993 to launch a non-confrontational exercise under the title of Trade Assessment Mechanism (TAM, in Japanese: boeki hyoka mekanizumu) which aims at improved access to the Japanese market by mutual agreement on an objective basis of data. For this purpose an EC-Japan expert group has been set up to conduct a joint analysis of the factors affecting the comparative performance of European products on the Japanese market (and vice versa).

The European Commission carries out a statistical analysis of the trade of goods and services, in comparison with Europe's performance on the markets of its comparable trading partners, and the performance of Japan's partners on the Japanese market. Using Europe's performance with other advanced partners (e.g. USA, Canada, Australia) as a reference, the European Commission regularly conducts a systematic evaluation together with the Japanese authorities. A general review of the resulting recommendations are undertaken by the Annual EU-Japan Ministerial Meetings.

The purpose of this joint TAM exercise is not to set quantified targets for trade, but on an objective basis to identify problems, to establish their causes, and to propose action for their timely resolution.

The expert group therefore has agreed to retain two main indicators for the further analytical work:

One indicator allows the experts to identify the products in which European firms perform below average in the Japanese marketing comparison with the European firms' performance in the other markets. Whereas the other indicator allows the identification of products in which European firms perform below average in comparison with the European firms' foreign competitors in the Japanese market.

However, unlike other previous bilateral exercises by Japan with their trading partners, no joint communique or other resulting common document is expected to be signed as the outcome of the exchanges at working level. Nevertheless, TAM without any numerical targets, but through its simply creating mutually on an objective basis awareness of problems for trade on both markets has already considerably contributed to overcome stereotype perceptions, to build confidence and trust as well as in concrete terms indirectly to reduce barriers to trade. (European deficit down by 20% in 1994 over 1993).

It is noteworthy that the EU-Japan TAM exercise precedes by about half a year the still controversial "Framework for a New Economic Partnership agreed upon between the USA and Japan in July 1993 which also aims at a joint assessment" based upon sets of objective criteria⁶. . . which will be established using relevant information and/or data that both Governments will evaluate". Hence one can conclude that concerning the image of the closedness of the Japanese market steps are finally being taken to overcome one-sided prejudices through cooperative assessment exercises with major foreign partners on an objective basis.

In addition to overcoming stereotype images of Japan through the enhanced exchanges of goods and services, the increased movement of people from and to the country is still the best means to improve the communication of the truth on both sides of the borders.

While some 15 million or so Japanese now travelling abroad annually have certainly changed the perception of the Japanese world-wide, the (unfortunately declining) number of foreigners (3 mio in 1993) coming here who learn through living every day amongst them are the closest observers of Japanese reality. In order to improve the comprehension of things Japanese, the European Commission has created an Executive Training Programme in Japan (ETP) which aims to build up a pool of European managers qualified to serve as catalysts for doing business with Japan. ETP was established in 1979 in recognition of the fact that penetration of the market is greatly facilitated if there is a pool of people who are able to speak Japanese and who have a first-hand knowledge of Japanese society and business.

Since its inception, the Commission has offered over 500 European executives the opportunity to learn Japanese and to familiarise themselves with Japanese culture and business practices. ETP is a very intensive 19-month programme, of which the first 12 months are almost entirely devoted to language training. In addition, the participants are offered a programme of factory visits and business seminars. During the last 6 months, participants work in Japanese companies. This period of in house-training is one of the most powerful features of ETP since it not only gives the participants the opportunity to practice their Japanese language knowledge in a real-life situation, but it also provides a rare opportunity for total immersion into Japanese business life, including the valuable after-hours contacts for long-term relationships (the so-called "nomification").

However, there remains a vast field of activity to overcome misconceived images of Japan in the more culture-centered context. In comparison with for example the British Council, the Institut Français or the German Goethe Institut, Japan's Culture Centres, anyhow still few in

numbers, contribute hardly sufficiently to eliminate prejudice by disseminating at home and abroad knowledge of her language and other cultural characteristics, but rather afford anecdotal images to spread world-wide untempered by enlightenment from facts.

In a nutshell; communication and cooperation⁷ is the best means to overcome stereotypes. This conference has contributed to betterment, but the word has to be spread to the mass media which still demand sensational headlines of "Japan being so different" and neglect mankind's common denominators.

Notes

* The author expresses his strictly personal and private opinion.

1 From "50 honorables raisons de detester le Japon" (by S. Benamou, Albin Michel, Paris 1992) to "The Ugly Japanese" (by F. Bartu, Yenbooks, Tokyo 1993) just to name a few recent book-titles.

2 See for details: U. Pauly, Sakoku, "Zu den Hintergründen von Japans Abschliessung unter den Tokugawa", OAG aktuell, Tokyo 1989.

3 cf. E. Gossmann, "Am Anfang war die Frau die Sonne. . .", in: Die Frau, OAG-Reihe Japan modern, Berlin 1980, p. 23.

4 See photos in: J.G. Roberts, "Mitsui, Three Centuries of Japanese Business", New York 1973, between p. 114-115.

5 Sanwa Sogo Kenkyusho, Obei to hikaku shita nihon no yunyu shoheki do, Tokyo 2.7.1993.

6 cf. Nihon Keizai Shinbun, 11.7.1993.

7 cf. Tokyo Shinbun, 8.6.1995, on the success of the cooperative approach of the EU in contrast to the confrontation with the USA on imports of cars and components.