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Culture Matters: The Ties that Bind U.S.-Japan Relations

BY MATTHEW KUSTENBAUDER

When President Obama embarked on his Asia tour in November, it was hardly surprising that Japan was the first stop. With an economy second only to the United States', Japan's place in the world, Obama noted, has been firmly at America's side since the day President Dwight D. Eisenhower stood beside Japan's Prime Minister and declared the creation of "an indestructible partnership" based on "equality and mutual understanding."¹

To be sure, the ties that bind the two nations run deep. The United States underwrote Japan's recovery after World War II, first canceling war reparations payments and then purchasing over a quarter of Japan's exports in support of America's military engagement in the Korean peninsula. Even so, Japan received nothing like Europe's Marshall Plan. The real reason for the Japanese Miracle was, according to Obama, the "Japanese peoples' spirit of resilience and industriousness," by which they emerged from wartime devastation and quickly climbed to the top of the world economic heap. These "common values," noted the President, explain the success of Japan and of the U.S.-Japan alliance.

They are provocative words that warrant a reevaluation of culture's significance in economic development and foreign affairs. Could it be that the U.S.-Japanese powerhouse, which accounts for a third of global economic output and nearly forty-five percent of world military spending, rests on a bedrock of shared cultural values? A closer look at the history of Japanese foreign relations suggests that culture did, in fact, play a critical role in Japan's success on the international stage.

In his book, *Punishment and Power in the Making of Modern Japan*, Daniel Bots-

Matthew Kustenbauder is a Ph.D. student in History at Harvard University. He holds an M.A. in African Studies and an M.Div. from Yale University.

man argues that Japan's modernization resulted from its desire to gain the respect of America and the "great powers." It is a story of breaking with a barbaric past, emerging onto the world scene as an underdog, and cumulating international political clout by "talking the same talk" as the West. The reform of Japan's penal system exemplifies this transformation.

The brutal capital and corporal punishments of its pre-modern era highlight the extent of modern Japan's departure from its sanguinary past. Japanese society during the Tokugawa period (1603-1868) was governed by a warrior class of samurai under the direction of powerful shogun generals. These military leaders were the *de facto* rulers of a centralized feudal system that brought peace and stability to Japanese society for two hundred and fifty years. But peace came with a price.

The spectacle of punishments horrified Western nations, whose global expansion frequently brought them to Japan's shores. When Commodore Matthew Perry and the U.S. Navy arrived in Edo (Tokyo) Bay in 1853, the isolationist shoguns were forced to accept a series of treaties that opened Japan's ports to foreign traders, diplomats, and sailors. The "Unequal Treaties" converged with a rising tide of social ferment within Japan to undermine the Tokugawa shogunate, which eventually succumbed to revolution.

In 1868, the newly established Meiji government focused on "building national strength in the face of the foreign threat."² The foremost objective was to scrap the Unequal Treaties and place Japan on more equal footing with the great powers. As histories of nationalism demonstrate, a sense of inferiority can be a powerful motivator.

Japanese prison reform, one aspect of Japan's nationalist transformation in the years after the Meiji Restoration, offers a compelling case of the impact of culture on international relations. Meiji leaders understood that cultural adjustment had the potential to stave off colonial encroachment. Western nations justified the Unequal Treaties on ideological grounds – their citizens couldn't be locked away in Japanese prisons or tried in Japanese courts until the specter of "Oriental barbarism" was laid to rest.

Within months of the coup, the Meiji denounced the "evil practices of the past" and pledged to seek "new knowledge" from the West.³ In 1871 a new national criminal code, the Shinritsu koryo, made sweeping changes. It abolished the practice of burning criminals alive, curbed the ever-popular crucifixion, replaced banishment with "penal servitude," and subjected capital sentences to the emperor's approval. Meiji envoys distributed copies of

the new code in the United States and Europe during a diplomatic mission to reopen treaty negotiations.

To further convince Western nations, Japan's leaders overhauled its prisons and courts as well. In 1874, just six years after the Meiji Restoration, Japan's first modern, Western-style prison was completed in Tokyo.

While reforms in the prisons alone cannot explain Japan's dramatic rise, they were emblematic of a wider transformation of Japanese society. The feudal structures that bound Japanese people together for centuries were replaced virtually overnight by a network of prisons, factories, military regiments, and schools that regulated the day-to-day activities of the nation's citizens. These new institutions worked in lockstep to discipline the masses and achieve the dream of a modern, civilized Japan.

Significantly, the Unequal Treaties ended with Japan's success in its first modern war with China (1894-1895) and the annexation of Taiwan as a colony. Their 1905 victory over tsarist Russia surprised the world and gave a boost to Japanese nationalism by proving that it could defeat a Western empire. Japan had finally joined the ranks of imperial nations and achieved "great power" status.

Thus Japan's pivotal moment came at the end of the nineteenth century, when the threat of Western colonialism triggered a social and cultural revolution. Had the Meiji government failed, history would look very different. A great Japanese empire may never have dominated the Pacific. More importantly, the "common values" of "resilience and industriousness" may never have taken shape.

Obama was right about one thing. The U.S.-Japan alliance is more than an economic partnership; it's about shared values and interests. With the threat of a nuclear-armed North Korea and the rise of China as a major player, Japan occupies a strategic position in American foreign policy. The question is whether the United States can build on a shared history and common cultural values to retain Japan as an ally. In a world in which the relative power of the two nations is eroding, the need to strengthen the ties that bind America and Japan are more pressing now than ever. ■

NOTES

¹ Dwight D. Eisenhower, quoted by Barack Obama in his November 14, 2009 Tokyo speech, on the occasion of the signing of the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between the United States and Japan in Washington, D.C. on January 19, 1960.

² Daniel Botsman, *Punishment and Power in the Making of Modern Japan* (Princeton, 2005), 115.

³ *Ibid.*, 115.