

The Old to the New Generation

by Laurence Jeffers

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The Old to the New Generation

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Japan over the last century has changed drastically both as a country and as well as a society. Japan having a long history of about 2000 years has a lot of traditional culture still present as well as the mixture of western culture. Being an island country it was able to develop an unique way of thinking that could be only seen in Japanese people. The people had a lot of pride for having their own style and hated to be influenced by others. This so called pride was called "Yamato Damaishii", meaning the spirit of Yamato. In modern Japan many people still believe that a true Japanese man should keep this pride within himself. Although now in the modern days there still are people who think like right wing nationalists, there are a lot of people who have a different way of thinking as well. Ever since Japan surrendered in World War II, Japan has westernized and still is westernizing everyday until the present day. Therefore the Japanese society as a whole is very diverse in terms of the way they think and the way they function in society. I believe that the Japanese society can be divided into three major groups. The three groups being the old generation, middle aged generation, and the new generation. These three generations differ immensely in the way they think and function in society. They were all brought up in different environments which brings about the diversity. Although this could be said to be true for any country, I think the difference between the generations in Japan is incomparable to any other country. The westernizing of Japan by the U.S. had such tremendous impact on each of the three generations that it has

changed the Japanese society itself. Therefore when you want to talk about the Japanese society as a whole, I think one must look at it from three different perspectives.

The first group would be the older generation. This generation would pertain to the people of ages of about over 60. These people were the last generation of Japanese to have experienced the war. Until the war, many of the Japanese still believed in the isolation of Japan as a nation and the hatred of the foreigners was still present in the feelings to many of the people. However after surrendering, the Japanese were forced to except the western culture and were forced to adapt to it. Therefore their is a mixed feeling in the people of the older generation forming between the pride these people have and the westernizing that was occurring in Japan for most of their life. Another fact that concerns a lot of the Japanese now is the aging problem. Japan being one of the top countries in the world for having good life expectancy, is now being troubled by it. There are too many old people now and they are having difficulties trying to get along in society. I would like to investigate how the older generation thinks of themselves in terms of how they function in society and what they expect from it.

The next group would be the middle age group. These people pertain to the age of about 30 to 60. These people are the ones who grew up in the westernizing days of Japan. However they had parents believing in the traditional Japanese way of thinking. Therefore these people again came up with their own way of thinking unique only to their age group. The middle age

group is the major sustenance of the Japanese economy now. They are the ones who made the economic miracle of Japan. The question is, what motivated them to work so hard and what were their mixed feelings towards how society should really work being squashed between the traditional Japanese style and the westernizing occurring right in front of their eyes.

Finally the last generation to consider is the new generation. The age groups of about 30 and under. This is the generation that has not experienced the war and the hard times of Japan. The somewhat lucky generation is very westernized in the way they think and have their own function in society as well. The biggest problem that they face is the lack of motivation that is present amongst the new generation, not knowing the hard times of Japan. Will this generation be able to maintain the economic status that Japan has kept, or will it make the economy better with the westernized way of thinking that they have acquired? Where is the Japanese society heading towards in the future? These are some of the questions I would like to answer. By examining each of these age groups, I believe I will be able to present to you a good understanding of the Japanese society and where it is heading in the future.

The Old Generation

One of the problems the older generation has is the aging problem.

The population of Japan is aging at a rate unmatched elsewhere in the world. By the beginning of the 21st century, Japan will have an aged society, with an extreme high proportion of elderly people and few children at a level that no other country has ever experienced.ⁱ

These old people not being able to be productive to the country are causing a problem and to put it in a very coarse way, are creating a burden to society.

The Ministry of Health and Welfare estimates (1992) that the ratio of people aged 65 and over in the total population will continue to rise rapidly until the year 2020, reaching about 28% in the 2040-2050 period before stabilizing at approximately 25%.ⁱⁱ

The people who should be getting all the care and respect are not getting it, while on the contrary they are being treated like a bothersome aspect to the society. It is a sad fact that many old people in Japan are ashamed of themselves because they cause problems to everyone. One major difference between Japan and the West is that children are obligated by law to provide for their parents. According to a 1990 survey, a majority of Japanese elderly said they would prefer to spend their wealth on themselves than to leave it to their children.

The National Survey on Family Planning reports that in 1963, 80 percent of married women under 40 surveyed thought it a "good custom" or a "natural duty" for children to support their parents. By 1996, only 47 percent thought it a good idea for children to care for their parents.ⁱⁱⁱ

In order to compensate for this situation, the government has postponed the mandatory retirement until 65 and also is developing a public pension system that will help promote employment for senior citizens. Although actions are being made to better the situation, the sad fact that elder people are a burden to society still remains.

Another major factor to consider about the older generation is that they were the last generation to experience the war. The Japanese people back then thought of themselves as being the strongest nation in the world, but was shocked by the atomic bomb that they were not. The U.S. had the Japanese emperor announce on radio so that every Japanese person can here, that the Japanese had lost the war. He also was told to tell the Japanese people that he himself was not a supernatural figure, but was an ordinary man not different from everyone else. The people were taught to face this sad fact in turn for all the innocent lives that passed away from the bombing. The older generation wants to make sure to hand down to future generations the strong wish that the tragic experience of the atomic bombings shall not be repeated. Some say that the reason why Japan was able to come back so strongly economically after the devastating war was because of the tremendous shock these people had. They saw for themselves that they must work hard to get back on their feet. As a result, they were able to do so, and were able to make Japan one of the top countries in the world economically. However, the new generation can not relate to this tragedy and a major concern now is if they can keep up the motivation the older generation had.

Many of the older generation people are still strong believers of nationalism. Although Japan lost devastatingly to the U.S., some Japanese still think that they are the strongest nation and that they do not need the help of other countries to get along. These people are obviously the ones who opposed to the westernizing and the ones who formed the right wing

coalition, the "uyoku". A lot of the uyoku members are Mafia related and many have strong connections with the Japanese government. In 1987 former prime minister Noboru Takeshita was elected as prime minister but later was involved in a scandal that said he might have acquired the help of some uyoku members to get elected. Although not revealed in the public, we Japanese know that many of the top executives in major corporations have strong connections with the uyoku. A lot of the older generation still are strong believers of nationalism and still influence the new generation in these aspects. However, due to the strong westernizing still taking place, numbers of right wing nationalists are declining every year. Hopefully one day there will be no more nationalists and world peace will come. But until then, we must understand that this nationalistic belief is what kept Japan going since the beginning of its history and that it is an important aspect of the Japanese culture.

The people of the old generation definitely were the ones who experienced the hardest times of Japan. However, with the Yamato Damashii the people all had within themselves, they were able to get Japan back on its feet and even make it a big economic giant. But unfortunately, due to the aging problem, these people are not getting the care and respect they should be getting. But being a true man, these people do not want the slightest bit of remorse. All they ask from the generations to come is for them to not make the same mistake they had made which killed many innocent lives and was considered to be the worst tragedy of Japanese history.

The Middle Aged Generation

The next group that we must consider is the middle age group. The first impression I get when I think of middle aged Japanese is that they are very conservative. Indeed this is a fact for many middle aged people and contributes a lot to the way they function in the society. A major problem that the middle aged group is facing now is the childless problem.

Not only are women marrying later, but when they do marry they are having fewer children. In the early postwar years, the average Japanese woman gave birth to four children. By 1989 the number of births per woman had plummeted to 1.57. That set off a virtual panic among the male political leaders. Serious attention was focused on the declining birthrate yet the average has continued to fall, reaching 1.43 in 1995.^{iv}

The sole reason to why this is happening is due to the middle age group being conservative in their lifestyle. They know that it would be costly to have a lot of children so they decide to go conservative. However this conservative action is leading Japan to an aging society. But I wouldn't fault the middle age group to be totally wrong. There is a major problem to the Japanese society itself. It is the society that is putting a limit to what the people can have. The standard of living in Japan is way too low.

When compared with America, Japan's GDP translates into \$3.62 trillion at the market exchange rate of 140 yen to the US dollar. This is \$28930 for each Japanese, not much different from the American figure of \$30,150. But the market exchange rate is not the right way to obtain dollar figures to compare standards of living between countries - it is heavily influenced by external transactions. For this purchasing power parity (PPP) of the yen has to be used. Based on the OECD's 1997 PPP of 169 yen, Japan's GDP per capita is only \$23,810 - roughly eighty percent of the US level. Yet, it is hard to

believe that Japan's living standard lags behind that of the United States by only twenty percent. The impression shared by many visitors from America and Europe - and by myself - is that the Japanese live a much more frugal, if not poor, life than indicated by that differential.^v

Although most Japanese know that their standard of living is very low, surprisingly, most Japanese are satisfied with their status. I consider this to be a major problem though. The people must get more aggressive and should demand more. Why do the people have to sacrifice their own living to meet the standards of the norm. If Japan is one of the top contenders in the economic world, the same must be true for their standard of living.

Although their conservative way of thinking could be bad, it has also helped the Japanese economy as well. Most of these middle aged men are businessmen, referred in Japanese as the salaryman. They are the major sustenance for the Japanese economy. Japanese salarymen are referred to as the working bees because they work so much. They are very conservative and are satisfied with their low standard of living, do not complain a single bit and work to support the family. This is a typical Japanese man. Very unique but gives you a good understanding as to how Japan was able to achieve its economic miracle. These hard working middle aged men portray the typical Japanese man and gives the world the impression that Japanese men are like robots, who do whatever they are told to do no matter how small their return is.

Another major problem that is haunting the middle aged workers is the "listra" problem. Due to the economic recession

in Japan after the bubble burst, many Japanese companies had to restructure the company by firing some of their workers. A big portion of them being the middle aged workers who have no where to go once fired. Some workers not being able to explain this situation to their wives, spend all the day in a park near the office pretending as if they had gone to work as usual. This situation makes many of the middle aged workers feel very insecure and is definitely not a good factor to the economy. The government must come up with plans to support these type of people more.

This is also the generation in which many women in Japan started expressing equality of sex. Ever since the westernizing of Japan began after the war, the women in Japan gradually started to gain power in the society by expressing equal rights. Until then, men were superior beings and women had to listen to what men had to say. In the older generation, this is still true in many cases and you see a lot of old women very loyal to their husband. In modern Japan, much of this has gone. Although there still are very unusual situations in offices which can not be seen in any other country. In Japanese offices, there is a tendency for men and women to create separate worlds. Unlike in other countries where couples form friendships, in Japan men hang out with men and women hang out with women with little cross-group communication. Top executives very likely only know women as their wives or those who wait upon them including women staff members. Women as equal work partners is a concept beyond their familiar world. Not only is this true in offices but many Japanese especially

the old and the middle aged generation, have a tendency to form a barrier between men and women. A typical case seen in many Asian countries.

I believe the middle aged Japanese have had the least freedom in what they could do compared to the other two generations. They were given no choice but to work as hard as they could to make Japan a successful country. Many of the people growing up at the time when Japan was very poor after the war are satisfied with the low standard of living they have because this is still better than the situation most people grew up in. However, I still strongly believe that these middle aged men could be more aggressive in terms of trying to higher their standard of living because they have shown that they deserve and are capable of demanding from the economic miracle that they were able to achieve. The women were able to achieve what they want, and I believe that the men can too.

The New Generation

The new generation has a very western way of thinking. Me being one good example of this. I grew up in Japan all my life for 18 years. My generation definitely has a different way of thinking about society compared to the other generation and we have our own way of functioning in society. As heard in a famous Japanese proverb, "The nail that sticks out must be pounded back in" the Japanese society always wanted someone to be the same as everyone else. Anyone unique in their own style were treated as outcasts and not good to a community. However it is a fact that there is less and less of this everyday. Now

people believe in the American proverb, "Only the squeaky wheels gets the oil". More and more individuality is being given credit, and nowadays in order to become successful, one must be unique from the others. This is a big change in the Japanese society and is a feature only seen upon the new generation.

However, this western way of thinking also brings upon some trouble as well. As you know, the Japanese people are famous for their hard working ability. But their there is an issue raised now saying that the new generation lacks in motivation to work. There was a consensus taken by young Japanese teenagers asking what they want to be in the future. In the 70's and early 80's, many teens wanted to be doctors, lawyers and some occupation that has a high status. However in the 90's their is a trend in that less teens are wanting to be something of high status. As I said before, the new generation gives credit to the fact of having self identity, and don't believe in the fact that they must be alike everyone else and that they should aim for something high. That is why the consensus shows that many of the teens in the new generation want to have a contented life with the least amount of work possible. As long as they are happy they are satisfied. Whether this will turn out to be good or bad we still do not know, but is an interesting fact to consider when thinking of where Japan could be heading in the future. Will the new generation still be able to maintain the economic status Japan has kept for many years with the lack of motivation they have when it comes to working.

Another interesting fact to consider is the education system of Japan. The education system had many changes within the last few decades and is still changing everyday. The Japanese education system changed drastically from a military like system where students were treated like soldiers to a western system where students are given respect and treated as a human being. Before students were educated at school and were told that the school was right in whatever aspect and that the students had to obey whatever the school said. But now, every individual is valued for their own thoughts and many schools are adapting the western way of teaching. However there still are some schools where teachers think they are still the superior over the students and force them to learn many things. The students oppose to this type of teaching and at times students try to get back at teachers and a very bad environment could form within a school. The crime rate of middle school and high school students are increasing every year. There is still belief amongst students that students and teachers could never get along but this way of thinking is gradually fading away as well.

Conclusion

The three different generations of Japan make Japan a very unique country. They each have a different way of thinking and what they expect from each other in society differ as well. Due to the rapid westernizing of Japanese society after the war, Japan has created a society where there are many different ways of thinking amongst the different generation. Although Japan

was able to come back strong economically after the war, the question still remains whether the new generation could keep up this economic status. The Japanese people value more of the individuality now than ever before. Being so international now, people wonder where the traditional Japanese way of thinking has gone. The old generation always ask for the Yamato damashii amongst all of the Japanese men, but some of the new generation people don't even know what Yamato damashii is. Whether this new way of thinking is going to turn out to be good in the future or could it ruin the Japanese society we still don't know but is definitely something we should watch upon how it is going to turn out.

I personally think that the most important thing the three generations must keep in mind is the respect they must give each other. The old generation tend to look down upon the new generation as being westernized and lacking in the true Japanese spirit while the new generation have no respect for the old traditional ways of thinking. However, in order for Japan to keep its status as a country, the new generation must respect the old generation for making Japan one of the most prosperous countries in the world after the devastating loss in the war and at the same time the old generation must rely on the western way of thinking which is what helped Japan come back to its feet. Therefore the best possible direction the Japanese society should head is for the Japanese to have pride in their long history as a country (have some Yamato damashii) but at the same time accept the western way of thinking that they were taught, which is the key factor that helped and still is helping the

Japanese to be one of the most unique and interesting people in the world.

ⁱCoping With the Aging of the Population,
www.mofa.go.jp/j_info/japan/viewpoint/q2.html

ⁱⁱ Coping With the Aging of the Population,
www.mofa.go.jp/j_info/japan/viewpoint/q2.html

ⁱⁱⁱ pg. 90, The American Enterprise; Washington; Sep/Oct 1997

^{iv} The New Lifestyles of Japanese Women,
www.mofa.go.jp/j_info/japan/opinion/iwao.html

^v pg.17, The World Today, January 1999

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