

The Inspiration Is Out There

By *Fernando A. BUSCA*



Author
Fernando Busca

BBC radio/TV personality Jonathan Ross said in his great documentary series *Japanorama*: Japan is an exclusive club with 127 million members. The more time goes by since I came to Japan, the more I have the feeling that this club will soon have to decide if it reduces its membership requirements or not. The reason is simple; the Japanese people do not have enough children to guarantee the population's natural growth or sustainability.

This challenge only has two possible options: either Japan solves it using domestic resources or it opens its doors to immigrants and foreign money. The first option has evident problems: regarding the shrinking population, it seems that Japanese women do not favor having more children, even if that upsets Mr. Masuzoe Yoichi, the minister of health, labor and welfare. And regarding its economic growth using domestic resources, it seems the Japanese economy has not taken off since it got over the crisis after the early 1990s burst of the economic bubble, adding to the growing and threatening foreign competitors.

■ The Crisis

Some 30 years ago, the United States observed through the rear-view mirror and started to sweat when it saw a powerful Japan riding a cheap Toyota. At present, Toyota has become the world's largest automaker, buoyed by growing sales worldwide, and companies such as Nintendo and Sony export some of the most advanced expressions of Japanese pop culture. In Japan, however, there is a certain feeling of dissatisfaction. In my opinion, it has to do with a natural and perhaps necessary crisis that can be translated into the lack of clear objectives, leadership and motivation of the young people.

This confusion has resulted in the

birth of surprising phenomena such as *freeters*, a term that defines a young person living with his parents, without a professional career and surviving with low salary and minor employment. Their social status does not allow them to start a family or to socially develop. According to Wikipedia, the number of *freeters* will reach 10 million by 2014.

As for Japan's political role in the world, I'm surprised at its low profile compared to its economic power. History is very important on this side of the world and old grudges still cause unwanted actions. Besides, Japan needs to learn to become self-assured while getting along with the other main regional power, China.

The lack of leadership was relieved during Koizumi Junichiro's term as prime minister, a man who, in spite of his defects such as his unnecessary provocations to China, challenged Japan's establishment to carry out reforms that he considered necessary. But after him, some political elites recovered their strength, and in order to succeed, they'll need to have a strong will to fight the temptation of boosting public spending that is already sky-high.

Due to their Spartan discipline and hard work, the Japanese created the world's second largest economy in a century and a half. But the Japanese got too comfortable with their success, and while other countries in the region continue growing at a fast pace, the aged Japanese society wonders "what's next?"

■ To Open or Not

The rest of the world has changed. The national borders have opened up, and if a country keeps its borders closed in order to keep things the way they were, it will start last in the race

against the other countries. Therefore, it appears that the solution is to keep the door wide open to the other countries. This implies a change of attitude, but in the case of Japan, things seem a lot more complicated. The country has its own reasons to be skeptical of the opening.

Since I came to this country, I have frequently heard the Japanese people describe Japan in two ways. The expression that I have heard the most is: the nail that sticks out gets hammered down so it will be as high as the others.

To me, coming from Spain, it seems a little bit too hasty. Without doubt that would guarantee harmony. Japan is the cleanest, most educated and successful country that I have been to. Besides, Japan's Gini index, which measures inequality, is one of the lowest in the world (according to United Nations data), while the Gini indexes of the United States and China, a country of wild pseudo-capitalism, are very similar.

But those undeniable Japanese virtues are achieved through rigidity, restrictions and limitations that take away flexibility. And flexibility is especially important in times of globalization, a phenomenon that has provoked situations that were unthinkable some years ago. The traditional protection the Japanese companies used to provide to their employees for their devotional dedication is not a guarantee anymore. The taxpayers are concerned about soundness of the pension system and the employers fear international competition.

■ Background

Unavoidably, the opening will modify Japanese culture, but such changes won't make it less Japanese. Japan's spectacular modernization was

achieved in a century by adopting Western techniques, practices and behaviors. However, Japan never quit being unique.

The second most frequent description of Japan by the Japanese that I have heard is: Japan is an island nation, and thus it has always been isolated, which inevitably continues to be. I sense some relief in this description, although I can't fully understand it. It sounds as if the Japanese felt more secure within their isolation.

It is true that the Japanese are very attracted to foreign countries. When I say I'm Spanish, I'm used to listening to excited Japanese reciting a long list of names, which most of the time includes Gaudi and flamenco, and which may also include F.C. Barcelona players or how delicious ham is.

■ Creativity

But when I try to see foreign influence on this land and its people, I realize that the Japanese took the foreign influence and put it in a rice cooker, transforming it into something deeply Japanese. The Japanese observed foreign companies and created the very powerful *keiretsu* (business affiliation); they modeled its political system to be similar to the British system and created a "one-party" democracy; and they took hamburgers and transformed them into *hanbagu*.

In his *Kill Bill* series, director Quentin Tarantino took Japanese traditions, symbols, personalities and images and transformed them into a 100% American movie. Well, the Japanese do the same with many of the influences they have adopted from abroad. And the result of this creativity is so fertile that it is inevitably magnetic for the rest of the world.

The die is cast. Willingly or not, Japan is playing a game online against

the rest of the world, and it has to continue moving forward in that game. The Japanese are experienced videogame players and they already have the key that will allow them to go to the next screen, the opening to the world; they only have to decide if they will open the door or not. And that will depend on their self-confidence.

Former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo designed a campaign aiming to show the world a "Beautiful Japan," which is an affirmation of the cultural, historic, economic and social attractions of this country. It seems that his initiative had the same luck as his short mandate, but I prefer to stick to the other example, which might show more accurately what is happening right now in Japan and how the Japanese look at themselves.

Last summer, foreign media had its eyes glued on the advertisement campaign for *Tsubaki*, a women's shampoo brand, which featured three very beautiful models with almond-shaped eyes. This advertisement reflected a change of paradigm and renewed confidence of the Japanese women in their own identity. The three models were showing off their long black hair with a slogan saying: "Japanese women are beautiful." **J.S**



Photos: Shiseido Co.



The brand image of "Tsubaki" and its advertisement

Fernando A. Busca is a staff reporter in the Tokyo Bureau of the Spanish news agency EFE. After working with different Spanish newspapers, he moved to Hong Kong. He worked in EFE's New Delhi Bureau before being transferred to Tokyo.