



# Opening Up Japan: Tremendous Progress but Still a Ways to Go

By Eric MARCKS



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When asked to write about my vision of Japan in the future, I was at a loss. Recent literature on Japan's fate – most of it negative from what I have heard – is abundant, but I have read almost none of it. Since moving back to Japan over four years ago, I have spent most of my time looking after my two young children and working as an attorney in Tokyo, which regrettably leaves me little time to keep abreast of trends in Japanese culture, politics, finance or other aspects of Japanese society. In this regard, I am probably no different from the average professional and parent living in Japan, and I probably share many common experiences with these peers. It is these experiences that I would like to share with you as I present my vision of Japan in the future.

## First Experience in Japan

I began studying Japanese in college in the United States, at the height of Japan's economic bubble of the late 1980s. After graduating from college with poor Japanese despite all my attempts to learn the language, I spent three years in Japan, first as an English teacher on the JET Program and then at a university where I studied classical Japanese literature. Those years in Japan transformed my fascination for the country into a lasting fondness, which remained with me as I returned to the United States to attend law school and then practice law in San Francisco and Silicon Valley.

## Move Back to Japan

My wife and I moved back to Japan with our one-year old child and another on the way right after Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi stepped down. I was excited to be back in the country that I had enjoyed so much as a student and to be working in an economy that was so vibrant. I was happy to see that Japan had become much more international than when I first arrived 20 years ago, and yet I detected an undercurrent of retrenchment. Of course, the falling numbers of Japanese studying abroad and the results of a recent survey showing that a majority of diplomats at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs wanted their next posting to be in Japan made national headlines, but I also observed less spectacular but perhaps no less meaningful phenomena in my immediate surroundings.

## International Schools in Japan

Enrollment in the Tokyo region's international schools fell after the March earthquake as many foreigners left Japan, but it appears that Japanese students are not rushing to fill the openings. Japanese schools have a good reputation, so I would not expect an exodus from Japanese schools to international schools, but I would expect that among the immense population of the Tokyo region there would be enough families interested in offering their children the opportunity to learn about other

cultures and languages at a young age and get a leg up in entering foreign universities to fill these spots. Instead, I understand that many of these spots are being filled by Chinese and Korean students who cannot enter international schools in their own countries because of fierce competition there and would rather be in an international school in Japan than in more-distant Australia, Britain, or North America.

I can imagine many reasons for Japanese parents not to send their children to international school, starting with cost and a desire to ensure that their children master Japanese reading and writing. But I've also heard from a number of Japanese parents who decided to put their children in international school that when they informed their ward office of this decision, ward officials questioned their decision and warned that once enrolled in an international school, their children could not re-enter the Japanese educational system. I also heard from a family with a child in an international school that they were going to transfer the child to a Japanese school when he entered elementary school in large part because the father, a professor at a national university, would be seen as betraying his mission as a civil servant if his child did not attend a Japanese school (never mind the facts that the father is a professor of foreign cultures and that the international school in question is a *gakkou houjin* and therefore subject to regulation by the Japanese Ministry of Education).

The apparent reluctance to provide children the benefit of an international education is troubling, both for the children and for Japan, because Japan can no longer afford to remain splendidly isolated, especially in the field of education.

## Japanese Universities

Japanese academia – at least, certain humanities and social sciences fields – too, appears to be withdrawing from the outside world. It has of course been reported that fewer and fewer Japanese university students are studying abroad and that the number of foreign students at Japanese universities is stagnant. Based on the experiences of my wife and her colleagues, however, it appears that this trend of isolation extends to the professorial ranks. My wife left Japan as a doctoral student to study in

the United States. She spent 10 years there, obtaining her doctorate from a top university, publishing papers in English, making numerous presentations at conferences in the United States, and teaching part-time at a university on the West Coast. When she returned to Japan and began applying for faculty positions a few years ago, however, she discovered that despite reforms designed to open up job openings to competition, nothing had changed since the time she had left graduate school in Japan. The results of faculty searches were still decided in advance – usually in favor of a graduate of the university conducting the search – and time spent outside of Japan was considered suspect for any candidate not seeking to teach English. One well-meaning friend of my wife's advised her – only partly in jest – to ignore the 10 years she had spent in the United States and think of herself as a new graduate



*You can't blossom without opening up*

from a Japanese university to increase her chances of finding a post. Another friend, who had obtained a Ph.D. overseas, was informed by a professor at a top university that because there were already too many job applicants who had risen through the Japanese system, there was no room in his department for scholars who had studied abroad. In most fields, studying abroad would be considered a benefit, but for those trying to teach at Japanese universities it can be handicap.

My wife's thesis advisor in Japan, a renowned scholar at a leading national university, recently quit his professorship in Japan to take up a position in England. He gave his farewell lecture before hundreds of students he had taught during his 20 years at the university. During the lecture, he reassured his students that they had nothing to worry about: Japanese academia was protected by the cocoon of the Japanese language, and as a result, during their careers, they would not have to compete with foreign scholars or ideas. This isolation is precisely the reason this professor gave up one of the most sought-after positions in his field in Japan; it was incompatible with his desire to encounter different ideas to challenge and stimulate his scholarship.

### Global Japanese Businesses

One segment of Japanese society that is not withdrawing from the world is business. Japanese companies of all sizes – no longer just the likes of Panasonic and Toyota – are turning their focus overseas in increasing numbers and with an increasing sense of urgency. I have had the opportunity to work with many of these companies. The quality of their products and services is superlative, as is their staff. And yet, too often I see Japanese companies negotiating from positions of weakness – even when they should be negotiating from positions of strength – because of the negotiators' inability to communicate effectively. I don't mean just conveying a clear message in English, but also reading between the lines and picking up signals and other non-verbal cues from the counterparty.

The difficulty in discerning these aspects of negotiations may be symptomatic of a larger problem confronting Japanese business: delays in discerning and capitalizing on global market trends (admittedly, a challenge for any company anywhere). Given its recent dominance in

portable music devices and cell phones, Japan should have invented the iPod and the iPhone. The Japanese bullet train, with its pioneering technology and flawless safety record, should be the global standard for high-speed rail. The list goes on and on. Commentators have written that Japan's misreading of overseas markets caused it to miss opportunities presented by these and other technologies. Without a population open to other cultures and sensitive to overseas trends, these missed opportunities are bound to continue, and not just in the business world, but in diplomacy, education, the arts, and other fields.

### Conclusion

It may not be obvious, but my outlook for Japan is not entirely pessimistic; otherwise, I would not have moved here with my family. Life in Japan is comfortable and interesting and my wife and I think that Japan is a good place to raise our children for the time being. But based on my personal experiences, Japan appears to be becoming ever more splendidly isolated and inward facing whereas the rest of the world is becoming an increasingly global, interconnected, and open society. In the face of this contradictory trend from the rest of the world, whether Japan can maintain a comfortable life for its population will remain an important question. I hope it can, and I hope that when my children become adults, they will have the opportunity to lead fulfilling lives in Japan. But perhaps unlike my local contemporaries at large, I (perhaps from a foreigner's point of view) also want my children to have the same opportunity to live anywhere in the world that their interests may lead them. To see to it that they have this possibility and that they acquire the tools to prosper in an increasingly global, interconnected, and open society, I will do all I can to send them overseas at a young age for exposure to different cultures, languages, and perspectives. This goal, for better or worse, is not one that I see my local contemporaries pursuing with great interest or urgency, which may shape the outcome of Japan in the future. **JS**

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