

Obsession or Dedication? The Japanese Work Ethic as a Nation Brand

By Marshall Sherrell



Author Marshall Sherrell

In October 1944, the Japanese military began to use *kamikaze* tactics to attack the ships of the Allied forces. The use of suicide attacks on such a grand scale left an impact indelible enough to warrant importing the word *kamikaze* into the English vernacular. As Western countries began to learn more about Japan, portrayals of another class of Japanese warriors, the Samurai, brought about the proliferation of words like *seppuku* and *hara-kiri*, the ritualized suicide made famous by the Samurai, and by movies and anime which told their tales. More recently, English dictionaries have also begun to include *karoshi*, the Japanese word for death caused by overwork. However, the unwavering dedication which spurred people on to actions the world regrets, has also manifested in ways which wrought great benefits for society.



Photo: Wikimedia Commons

Chiran high school girls wave off a kamikaze pilot.

Here I would like to introduce one more Japanese concept closely related to this topic: *kodawari*. This means something like “commitment”. It refers to the austere dedication with which one might approach an occupation or craft; the pursuit of perfection through which Japanese service industries attend to their guests, for example. In this article, I will enumerate my reasons for believing that the Japanese attitude toward work/duty would be one of the most effective and flexible nation brands Japan could promote.

How Nation Brands Are Formed by Adversity

Although the term “nation brands” was first printed in 1998, the practice is much older. We can see nation branding in phrases like one of America’s slogans: “Land of the free and home of the brave”, or France’s official motto “Liberty, equality, fraternity”. In both cases, these taglines now synonymous with the nations they represent came about from bloody encounters; America’s from the Battle of Baltimore in the War of 1812, and France’s from the French Revolution. Far from singular examples, the tendency to find a sense of identity through great adversity can be seen in nationalistic

movements around the world.

Nation branding attempts to harness the power of a national reputation and/or identity, condense it into an easily digestible marketing tool, and promote trade and industry with it. It cannot usually be plucked out of thin air, because nation branding is bigger than today’s companies or today’s markets. It encompasses what we expect from a country’s industries, services, culture, and people. Above all, effective nation branding must be authentic, which may be why adverse historical events are often the catalyst of a nation’s branding.



Photo: Dr.frog at en.wikipedia

An old print showing the bombardment of Fort McHenry, near Baltimore, by the British fleet on Sept. 13, 1814.

The Need for Authenticity

Perhaps the first thing that came to your mind as you read my introduction was something like “Why would you pick such negative imagery to represent Japan?” Indeed, Japan could simply brand itself as “Cool” as campaigns in the last decade have attempted to do. One of the fundamental issues with a nation brand focused on the export of pop culture items such as “Cool Japan” is the inherent disconnect from the very culture which produces it. Cool anime and fashion are relatively new cultural exports that represent only a small portion of Japan’s industries and fashion, and which fail to authentically portray Japan. Experts in nation branding have pointed out that, as it relates to marketing, nation branding must present something authentic — something real.

As modern consumers are becoming increasingly aware of where their products come from, niche markets have popped up to address these new consumer demands. While brandings such as German engineering or Italian clothing have been in demand for generations, new markets such as the “organic” and “fair-trade” markets have come about more recently as sustainability practices and eco-consciousness have become more prevalent among consumers.

That a product has been sourced from somewhere in particular, and that it represents some desirable trait of that culture, is becoming a priority for consumers.

This is why Japan cannot afford to ignore its history and cultural legacy in nation branding; because the global market demands it. Before there was a brand for “American technology” there were Americans developing new technology. Before “German engineering” there were German engineers. Most successful nation brandings have come about by steering a nation’s image into a positive light, rather than attempting to change that image completely. Of course, the promulgation of a topic so perilously mixed with positive and negative connotations as Japan’s work culture must be carried out cautiously. Nevertheless, I believe the potential benefit outweighs the risk of promoting the Japanese work ethic for the following reasons:

A) It relates most directly to products and services.

“Cool Japan” promotes the idea that Japan is a hub of emergent, edgy culture. It stands to create an image which correlates most closely with anime and videogames, but which largely ignores other important industries. Japanese cars and Japanese technology are not seen as cool in the same way. Furthermore, it doesn’t relate closely to quality. Cool is a subjective term; “good” is less so. And while cool can work for Japanese media exports like anime and videogames, an approach which focused on quality might work just as well for these industries too.

On the topic of Cool Japan exports, let’s consider the anime industry. The anime boom of the 1980s was a multifaceted phenomenon, but one major contributing factor was the quality of what was being produced in Japan. The level of detail, the shading and camera angles utilized in films like *Akira* were groundbreaking for the time. No country was using animation in the way that Japan was. What had become a small market targeted almost exclusively at young children, was being revolutionized in Japan, and the world began to notice. This had a lot to do with the quality of Japanese animation relative to other animated productions of the time. And that had a lot to do with *kodawari*.

B) It’s highly flexible.

As I’ve mentioned, Japanese dedication is a concept which could be highly flexible in directing a nation brand. This branding speaks of quality in service, quality in products, quality of infrastructure, personnel, etc. Its authenticity as a cultural fixture of Japan is unquestionable, and its influence is all-encompassing, because “dedication” connotes so many other desirable qualities for consumers. No industry doesn’t rely on quality, one of the byproducts of dedication.

After all, some things will always be true about consumer markets; such as a desire for products and services which are of a high quality. Although most people are craving authenticity to some degree as well, this will not and cannot trump the fundamental utilitarian needs that drive commerce. For example, while some American consumers may prefer free-trade certified, organic, single-origin coffee, many of them will settle for whatever coffee is available in their price range. In Japan’s case, a nation branding built on

Japanese dedication could communicate a very believable, authentic, Japanese image, while also assuring consumers of a positive experience if they choose to do business with Japanese organizations. In other words, it could satisfy both the “needs” and the “wants” of the consumer via a single message.

C) It’s synonymous with trust.

When you use a concept like “dedication” to talk about, for example, JR train operators, it means you can trust the trains to be on time. When speaking of a dedicated restaurant chain, it means you trust them to get your order right. A dedicated work culture produces the sort of products that people trust; which is why Honda cars might be called “high-quality” but are more often called “dependable” in my country.

Commerce is built on trust — this has never been truer than it is today. My parents’ generation had never heard of “identity theft” and even I can remember when a United States Social Security number might be printed right on your personal resume. Those days are long gone. Today, information and the protection of it is of the highest priority and consequence. Even the term “personal information” has changed its meaning to relate not to taboo or embarrassing topics, but to the numbers, passwords, and IDs by which you could be ruined if that information fell into the wrong hands.

In this increasingly vigilant world, Japan enjoys the reputation of being a safe country; a country in which visitors have reported losing their wallet and having it returned to the police station — with the money still in it. Generally, even young people can walk around in almost any neighborhood without fear. It’s perfectly normal to see people leave their computer or other belongings unattended at a coffee shop or restaurant if they go to use the restroom. Of course, there are exceptions to these examples, but Japan’s reputation as a safe country persists, to the benefit of the nation. This reputation for safety both promotes and is promoted by a general sense of trust in Japanese products, services, and society.

Luxury Branding by & for Japan

Recent market data show that Japan’s luxury spending has risen — a good sign for the nation’s economy. In fact, Japanese consumers have long been one of the most valuable customer bases among the world’s top luxury brands. The relative weakness of the Japanese yen has also recently attracted many tourists to Japan for the purpose of purchasing luxury items. As Japan approaches the 2020 Olympic Games, tourism is expected to rise even more, hence

Photo: Akiyoshi Matsuoka, Wikimedia Commons



A Japanese craftsman makes a traditional Japanese lamp for the annual Arashiyama Hanatōro festival in Kyoto.

Photo: Kakidai, Wikimedia Commons



The Giorgio Armani store at Roppongi Hills in Tokyo

the current branding efforts the nation is undertaking to capitalize on that opportunity. People on vacation love to spend money; so it's hard to see a negative side to this prospect for any Japanese industry.

I do not presume to propose one, but rather a rare opportunity for Japanese products to enter a market that already favors them. While Japanese customers make up a significant portion of the high-spending clientele of luxury brands, the businesses which own the luxury item market are generally European. Gucci, Prada, Burberry, etc.: these brands are meeting a demand in Japan's market that domestic brands have never been able to. If Japan can express a believable image of excellent craftsmanship founded on the dedicated Japanese work ethic, that could change.

This might seem like a too-strong statement considering the long-standing dominance of European brands in the luxury item market. However, local brands have long enjoyed a special privilege in Japan, which tends to strongly prefer domestic Japanese products. From cars and electronics, to food staples like rice or beef — Japanese customers hold fast to Japanese brands, and are often willing to spend more money for domestic products than for cheaper foreign brands. In a society like Japan, one might well ask how Japanese luxury brands have not yet risen to dominate even the domestic Japanese market.

More than likely, it's only a matter of time before Japanese brands catch up in the domestic luxury market. International markets may prove more difficult, considering the longstanding successful nation brands Japan would need to compete with. Luxury suits are still Italian, luxury perfume is still French, and these old standards do not seem likely to be uprooted any time soon. Although Japan has every ability to be represented in luxury item markets based on the merit of the products it produces, Japan's branding simply doesn't conjure up similar mental images of opulence and prestige as European luxury brands do.

By portraying the Japanese work ethic positively, the already high-quality products Japan is producing could be marketed as the work of dedicated craftsmen and artisans, rather than merely as good products. Luxury branding builds on the perception of historical authenticity and craftsmanship, both of which depend heavily on nation branding. Many luxury brands market their legacy based on the years they've been in business; whereas some relative newcomers have also risen to prominence as luxury brands — such as Dolce & Gabbana which has only been in business since 1985. Japan already enjoys a reputation as an ancient country with deep historical traditions of craftsmanship. If Japan markets this image strategically, it may be able to break into heretofore untapped luxury item markets.

In some Japanese industries, this is already happening. Tokyo

boasts the most Michelin star-rated restaurants of any city in the world. This reputation for gourmet dining experiences has undoubtedly contributed to the success of famous restaurants like Jiro Honten, which has a long waiting list of customers even while charging 30,000 yen per meal. Fine Japanese spirits also command a high price and are in high demand — so much so that Nikka and Suntory are running out of supplies of their luxury lines of aged whiskies, largely due to international consumer demand. As the world wakes up to Japanese craft mastery, it may not be long before Japanese clothiers or watchmakers are mentioned among names like Gucci and Rolex, if Japan can implement a conducive nation brand to capitalize on this emerging reputation for quality and *kodawari*.

Positive Dedication & *Kodawari*

After the end of World War II, Japan's economy was struggling, to say the least. In 1946, Japan set out to rise from the ashes and rebuild itself. In the years that followed, Japan's productivity and influence skyrocketed, establishing Japan as the world's second-largest economy during the late 1970s. Many factors contributed to this "Economic Miracle" but the heart of the movement was the Japanese laborer.

The postwar period was a time of great change in Japanese society. Labor recruitment was encouraged, including increasing the recruitment of women in labor industries. As some old traditions had to be done away with out of necessity, the emerging Japan rebuilt itself through the industrious efforts of workers like the *salaryman*, known for working long hours and taking few days off. There were and are serious flaws in this system. Nevertheless, dedicated work and production was the primary contributor to Japan's economic recovery.

The dedication I've been speaking of has given rise to unfortunate cultural exports that are distinctly Japanese, which I touched on at the beginning of this article. After *seppuku*, *kamikaze* and *karoshi*, Japan could hope that through a different perspective on the Japanese attitude toward work/duty, the next Japanese word to pop up in an English dictionary might be *kodawari*.

The ability to commit unwaveringly to some cause or goal is neither positive nor negative in itself. Just as the opposite connotations of synonymous terms like "confident" and "arrogant" can be used to describe the same idea in a positive or negative light, so also is differentiating between "dedication" and "obsession" largely a matter of perspective. As can be seen in Japanese history as well as modern events, there is both a terrible and a glorious potential to be found in this penchant for absolute commitment. For Japan to foster an image which is believable, authentic, and conducive to growth, it must not run from this legacy, but portray it in the best light possible.

JS

Marshall Sherrell is a 4th year student at the University of Washington, majoring in Creative Writing and Japanese. In addition to his studies, he writes for Samurai Meetups (samuraimetups.or.jp).