

The Ugly Japanese: Nippon's Economic Empire in Asia

By Friedemann Bartu
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Charles E. Tuttle, Tokyo, ¥1,280

If not racist, the title rings a bit too offensive and runs counter to the age of political correctness. Suspecting the book to be yet another trickle to the overspill of Japan-bashing would not be wide off the mark, notwithstanding the author's rhetorical ducking to claim otherwise. Friedemann Bartu, a Swiss correspondent for *Neue Züricher Zeitung* and Asia watcher with eight years' residence in Singapore, enumerates on anti-Japanese deeds, billing the Japanese as arrogant, exploitative, sneaky, inhuman and whatnot.

Crush-Japan crusade

Though some of his arguments correctly mention so-called "Japan problems," such as bid-rigging cartels and the laggard pace for localizing Japanese companies operating in Asia, particularly in terms of appointing high management personnel, the book regrettably contains many half-truths and overblown Japanophobia, not to mention obsolete facts that no longer stick. As the book is readable and presumably persuasive, a casual reader is well advised to turn the pages with a grain of salt.

Bartu begins his crush-Japan crusade by ridiculing and chiding how boorish Japanese tourists can be, especially when traveling in groups. But the "prawns and Pavarotti" syndrome is out of fashion in today's Japan where the economy is so weak that a book on honest poverty makes the bestseller list.

The author then goes on to carp at the Japanese for being clannish, exclusive, and aloof without ever mingling heart-to-heart with locals in the region. Indeed, many Japanese expatriates posted in Asia tend to confine themselves to their own community rather than sharing fun with Asian

friends after work. However, isn't it only natural they feel comfortable being together with the same kind when a stressful, long day is over? As they huddle together on the green or in a *karaoke* lounge, so do Europeans and Americans enjoy flocking nightly to the pubs and bars mostly occupied by whites. Thus, singling out the Japanese for being insular and self-isolating is an unfair comparison.

Bartu's next, much stronger salvo is leveled against the ruthless Japanese exploitation of its growing economic relationship with a largely supine Southeast Asia. Triggered by *endaka* (a significant rise in the yen), Japan's economic presence in Asia was dramatically augmented, particularly in the latter half of the '80s, with a huge influx of capital and an avalanche of manufacturing relocations. Though Bartu argues to the contrary, reeling off from a dossier of Japanese vices, Asians and Japanese are, by and large, on good terms. Grudges regarding Evil Empire II (Evil Empire I being the now defunct USSR), now established on the Asian turf, are an ill-witted fabrication.

A recent issue of *Asian Business* reports that there is no likelihood of return to the horror of anti-Japan protests which swept through Southeast Asia in the late 1970s. The main reason for the pose on the part of Asians is that they stand to gain much from lavish Japanese investments and technological assistance. "The mass trade imbalance is tempered, too, by the nature of the deficit; much of the Asian imports from Japan consist of capital goods and equipment that should eventually end up producing counterbalancing exports," comments the magazine.

Asians now generally regard their relationship with Japan as increasingly interdependent and mutually rewarding, rather than a one-way street solely in favor of Tokyo's interest. Deplorably, however, Bartu, buried in anti-Japan prejudices and merely repeating a barrage of musty clichés that the Japanese are "raping" the Asian economy, fails to grasp this key point.

Another encouraging sign for enhancement of the Japan-Asia part-



nership is the steady progress in technology transfers. With a higher technological standard currently enjoyed by many of the region's manufacturers, smaller Japanese firms are no longer a match for their erstwhile rivals. In addition, the countervailing power of the so-called Asian four tigers, namely Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan, is on the rise, offsetting the area's economic dependence on Japan. In 1991, their combined new investments in Southeast Asia surpassed Japan by as much as 14%. Battered by the domestic recession and post-bubble economic woes, Tokyo's money rush abroad is slowing down, and China appears on the scene as the next major target of Japan's overseas investment. Pragmatically minded ASEAN countries, in particular Indonesia, Thailand and Malaysia, are more apprehensive about Japanese money being diverted to the budding Chinese market than what Bartu describes as Japan's economic invasion of Asia.

Reciprocal partnership

Against this backdrop, Bartu's theory of Asian overdependence on Japan does not hold water. According to *Asian Business*, a senior official in Thailand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs is quoted as saying, "Thailand's relationship with Japan has gone from that of donor and recipient to one of partnership." Still, Bartu dwells on how disenchanting and mistrustful Malaysians have become with the Japanese over their national car project and the Look East policy. In fact, following the success of the first domestic car, the Proton Saga, the two countries will soon embark on the production of a second automobile. Despite his obituary and postmortem

analyses, Malaysia's Look East policy is still alive and kicking with the continued blessing of Mahathir and his government. Bartu's lopsided observation that the Japanese are always an anathema to Asians is not credible in light of the crystal clear evidence challenging it. Bartu's problem lies in his deliberately drawing on politicized anti-Japan comments by Asian leaders with little regard to content and hidden motives.

So sketchy is his knowledge about Japan's Official Development Assistance (ODA) to Asia, Bartu fails to understand how it has contributed to developing the region. Obsessed, he vilifies Japanese aid to Asian

neighbors as a sneaky ploy to cycle back the substantial gain to Tokyo and to control fledgling economies. Without the money spent largely for infrastructure, the industrialization of Asia would not have proceeded so successfully.

Bartu contradicts himself by denouncing Japan's Large-scale Retail Store Act as unfairly protecting inefficient mom-and-pop neighborhood stores, while growling at giant Japanese-capitalized department stores like Sogo for crowding out smaller local businesses in many of the Asian markets. This is a typical example of his illogical arguments.

In another chapter entitled

"Walkman Warrior," Bartu frightens the reader by saying that business is an extension of war for the Japanese, and their ultimate goal is dominance of the world. In today's mellowing Japanese social climate, such a samurai-minded, around-the-clock, can-fight businessman (such as those appearing in the Regain, a popular tonic, TV commercials) is nothing but a caricature. As Japanese society is fast aging, it won't be too long before those erstwhile die-hard workaholics are classified as an endangered species.

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TABLE TALK

Kyoto Ramen Shop

Like many Japanese males over the age of 60, I have always dreamed of just once going to a first-class Japanese restaurant in Kyoto to see the beautiful *geiko* from Gion dance. Twenty years ago a friend suggested that the two of us should go, but because of distance and a shortage of funds we never managed to pull it off. Just as I was about to forsake my dream, thanks to the Third Japan-Europe Aspen Conference held in May, it unexpectedly came true.

This important seminar was attended by 50 people from Japan and the European Community, along with their spouses. There were many high-ranking participants from the diplomatic, financial, and commercial fields, including former Japanese Prime Minister Takeshita Noboru, former British Foreign Minister Lord Geoffrey Howe, former French Minister for Social Affairs Jean-Louis Bianco, former Italian Trade Minister Renato Ruggiero, and Government Representative for the Paris Region Christian Sautter.

Following the conference sessions, the attendees enjoyed entertainment

that had been prepared by the Japanese hosts. The highlight was the *kaiseki ryori* dinner at Kyoyamato, Kyoto's top Japanese restaurant, and the *Miyako-odori* dances performed by traditional Japanese *geiko* from Gion and Ponto-cho. Forty *geiko* participated and former Prime Minister Takeshita, providing the toast as the representative for the Japanese sponsors, said, "This is actually my first time to entertain distinguished guests from other countries such as yourselves in such a magnificent fashion at Kyoyamato." It seemed that it was also the first time that many of the well-known people from the upper echelons of Japan's financial world had an opportunity to view *te-uchi*, a highly-formal, traditional Gion dance.

After experiencing Kyoto's natural surroundings, the city's ancient shrines and temples, its *geiko*, and the type of *kaiseki* meal that sets it all off so well, even the elite European guests, ordinarily so spirited and ironic, were subdued for just a moment.

I believe that I will always cherish the memories of sightseeing at the Kyoto Imperial Palace, where successive generations of emperors were enthroned, the Kyoto-style dance and koto performance at the Nomura



Tenka Ippin ramen shop in Kyoto, highly recommended by the author

Hekiun Villa which is as beautiful as Katsura Rikyu Imperial Villa, and the noh performance that was given at the home of the head of the Kongo Noh school. The beauty of Japan that was so highly praised by Bruno Taut and Andre Malraux still remains today and I think that Japanese should be proud to introduce that beauty to people from other lands.

This has been quite a divergence from the usual "Table Talk" column, but I would like to add one final point. I do not think that anyone would have any complaints regarding the splendid *kaiseki* spread at Kyoyamato, but we also have a taste for common fare. During my time at the Kyoto seminar, I twice found time to invite a colleague to Tenka Ippin, the ramen shop that I guarantee has the best flavor of Kyoto, and as usual I ate two bowls in one sitting.

Hori Yoshimichi
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