COVER STORY (3)

Festina Lente, or Hurry Up Slowly: Why Japan is Fast and Slow

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I

Henry Kissinger is no Japanologist. But he has the audacity to break into a terra incognita, this time Japanology. In his latest book, *Does America Need a Foreign Policy?* (Kissinger 2001), he expounded the theory of Japanese change and argued that Japanese are slow and too often procrastinate before making a big decision. It normally takes 15 years to make a big decision. His first example is Commodore Matthew Perry's visit to the Bay of Edo when he coerced Japan to open the country and its ports. It was 1853. After 15 years of internal squabblings and re-positionings, the Meiji Restoration of 1868 finally took place. His second example is Japan's defeat in World War II in 1945. After 15 years of the left-right confrontation and the search to counter-balance the United States with the now defunct Soviet Union and with socialism, Prime Minister Ikeda Hayato finally announced the income-doubling plan in 1960, a big decision, symbolizing the end of internal strife and the focus on economism. His third possible example is the collapse of Japan's bubble economy in 1991 and the subsequent inability to do something about it for more than a decade. His hunch is that something might take place in 2006 which would enable the economy to start picking up. His sentiment reflects the commonly held view about the reputed Japanese non-action and slowness.

The title of this article, "*Festina Lente*, or Hurry Up Slowly," is a self-contradiction. But it tries to convey the sentiment commonly held among Japanese that when they are in a hurry, it is better, meaning faster in the long run and more solid in achievement, to make a good preparation and to create consensus among those concerned. As Albert Hirschman writes,

> *A society can move forward as it is, in spite of what it is, and because of what it is.* (Hirschman, 1963, p. 6)

The Japanese are seemingly slow but in fact fast, as the many great transformations that they have engineered and gone through for centuries have amply vindicated – from the coerced opening of the ports and the country in 1853 to the convincing victory in the Russo-Japanese War in 1905, from the ashes in the wake of World War II in 1945 to the affluence even in the decade-long depression in 2002. Only through properly placing the dynamics of Japanese society in an historical context, can we better understand Japan's current predicament and be mildly optimistic about Japan's future.

II

Two films that I have seen recently have given me an eye-opening opportunity to see one of the origins of Japan's late medieval legacy. They are *Elizabeth* directed by Shekhar Kapur and *Shadow Shogun* by Kurosawa Akira. Both deal with the late 16th century, respectively in England and Japan. What they reveal is how remarkably similar both countries were up to the late 16th century and how starkly different they became in terms of the success or failure of absolutist rule.

In England, Elizabeth I was able to establish absolute power by severing ties with the Vatican and building the Anglican Church headed by herself, by weakening the Parliament, and by appealing to the broader population. England at that time was torn between Catholics and Protestants. Mary I, Elizabeth's predecessor and half-sister, was Catholic while Elizabeth was Protestant. On her deathbed, Mary asked Elizabeth, who she had feared all her life, not to punish her followers, the Catholics. Elizabeth said to the dying Queen that her conscience dictated such a course of action and she would respect such a wish. Later on, Elizabeth, who was courted both by the Spanish Royal heir and by the French court, decided to turn down such a proposal, both countries being Catholic and hostile to any other practice. She declared that she would reign as the Virgin Queen.

Such a decision was in fact a political gesture. She had to enhance her power base which was split between Catholics and Anglicans, to resist the Church and the Parliament which were in fact trying to reduce the role of the monarchy. As for the foreign powers, the Vatican and the foreign countries, especially France, Spain and Scotland, kept entangling England in an intermittently negative fashion. Ultimately, by repressing all the opposition to her, Elizabeth cunningly laid the foundation of English absolutism and, that was an historical turning point, to the notion of universalism in the governance of the kingdom.

Shadow Shogun by Kurosawa could not make a bigger contrast. The film is the story of Oda Nobunaga and his failed attempt at absolutism. The film portrays the famous Battle of Nagashino in 1575, hailed as the first military battle with a systematic use of firearms on a massive scale. It is only in 1641 that a similar battle with a systematic use of firearms would take place in Europe. At Nagashino, Nobunaga, using 3,000 guns, smashed the cavalry division of Takeda Katsuyori, on his way to the unification of late medieval Japan emerging after a century of war (the period known fittingly as the Warring States period).

Photo: Kyoiku Shuppan Center Corporation

Photo: Choko-ji / Toyota-shi Kyodo Shiryokan (Toyota City Local Museum)

Elizabeth I of England (left) was successful in establishing absolute power, while Oda Nobunaga of Japan failed in the 16th century

From his tiny fiefdom in central Japan, Nobunaga set out first to defeat his neighboring warlords. He then destroyed two rebellious Buddhist sects, one north of Kyoto, known as "Pure Land," the other in the mountainous South, known as the "Heavenly Base."

Nobunaga did not stop there. He also took over Sakai, a merchant republic in what is now Osaka Prefecture. As a ruler, although a medieval warring lord, Nobunaga was open to Western technology, religion and many other novel ideas. Not surprisingly, very much like Elizabeth, his enemies were numerous. They conspired to assassinate him. Besieged and in a hopeless position, Nobunaga finally set fire to a temple before killing himself rather than being captured and killed by his enemies.

Thus the most vigorous attempt to establish absolutism and possibly universalism in the governance of Japan foundered midway. Although thereafter came a hotchpotch unification of Japan in two steps, firstly by Toyotomi Hideyoshi, followed by Tokugawa Ieyasu, Japan, in my view, is still living with the legacy of the failed Nobunaga.

Notwithstanding, Ieyasu is widely said to have set the most enduring foundation of Japanese society and politics mainly because the Tokugawa shoguns ruled from 1603 to 1868. His legacy is however one of a late medieval system blending with early modern features.

Japan under the Tokugawa period was a mixture of central authority, with some federal pretension, 300 odd fiefdoms having some kind of basic autonomy, barring defense, diplomacy and external commerce. Over time, each fiefdom known as a domain was bound to develop its own set of features, much of which have survived until now, their main common characteristic being an imperviousness to change.

What happened was this: in those 300 odd domains, the people residing in fortified towns, being disarmed and dispossessed of land ownership by the Tokugawa, became the bureaucrats of the central authority. However, the central authority became weak, the bureaucrats had to run the local politics based on a consensus decision process among themselves, the lords (*daimyo*) being generally left as de facto figure heads with little or no power. Such a method of governance lead incrementally to an ad hoc and pragmatic problem-solving attitude, which lacked any content of universalism throughout the country.

In contrast to *Elizabeth* where the elements of a modern society are put together, *Shadow Shogun* underlies the resilience of the late medieval legacy in Japanese society, its politics and its economics. That legacy is still very much central to our current social fabric, to women's place in our society, and to our attitude to the perceived role of the Constitution.

III

First, let's look at the social fabric of Japanese society.

Business firms are, in theory, only and exclusively profit-seeking organizations. Yet, in Japan, a key feature of many firms is that they often give the impression that they are not committed 100% to seeking profit.

In other words, their ultimate goal is not to maximize profit. Of course, today, because of the current economic difficulties, lifetime employment has been publicly de-emphasized a great deal. Yet one can only be struck by the fact that, except for a very small number of business leaders, business firms are trying to avoid laying off people at all costs.

Why, if firms are having trouble, would managers resist layoffs? The reasoning could be as follows: layoffs undermine the morale of those not laid off; low morale brings about diminished labor productivity. Yet, pure efficiency is not what is at stake. Layoffs in fact destroy the harmony. So, what is happening is that firms are playing a dual role, ultimately ending up being in charge of social policy as well. As a result, the striking characteristic of the country is that not only the government but also the business community conduct social policy.

Thus the central government, with a reduced role, ends up being as it was during the Tokugawa days, a small government. And if we look at figures, it is indeed true that the Japanese government is small in comparison to its northwestern European counterparts and to the American federal government in terms of the ratio of civil servants to the general population. It is as small as the Tokugawa government was and as much as the 300 odd domains' bureaucrats were taking care of everything at the local level, nowadays we have 3,000 odd business firms who must take care of the local residents who are mostly their employees or

retirees. In good times or bad, however, there is one major problem in such a set-up. The business firms, unlike the 300 domains, are stock companies whose stocks are open to the market.

Here lies the first of a series of major fault-lines, for the business firms are exposed to the vagaries of the market, at the same time, one has to admit that labor productivity per hour in Japanese firms is not terribly high, since, in any case, it is not their highest priority.

Their priority is to produce and sell excellent goods and services, but those tasks should be in harmony with the social fabric of organization, and in a medieval society, it meant being in harmony with the domain you belonged to. And you still are what you belong to subnationally, be it the Satsuma domain (one of the 300 odd ones in what is now Kagoshima Prefecture), Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, the University of Tokyo, or the Ministry of Finance.

Because, and that is the legitimacy of the system, these subnational units are units enabling you to eat. You are what you eat.

One might think that the administrative and financial reform package which was legislated by the government led by the late Prime Minister Obuchi Keizo in early 1999, and the current one, should produce some tangible results in terms of staff reductions. But, on careful analysis, in the first phase of implementation, the cuts proposed by each bureaucratic agency are shocking in the sense that they are basically the same figures minus the number of those who retire every year anyway. So what does one conclude? That there is no reduction at all. Yes, the late medieval legacy is strong.

Inevitably, one may ask, and the question is raised daily in the foreign media, can Japan remain as it is? Or will the tide of globalization force it to subside? And if so, what will happen?

Actually and maybe, one would think it is paradoxical, we do not see a problem. After all, the late medieval features of Japan are very much in harmony with the features of globalization. Indeed one of the largest multinationals' catchword is the "expansion of globalization, the fragmentation of consumers."

Fragmentation is one of the elements of globalization. So, even though one might see Japan as an unrepentant remnant of the late medieval spirit and instincts, nevertheless globalization and fragmentation are what Japan most deftly can adapt to for it has been living with them for a long time.

But others might simply see Japan as a no less unrepentant remnant of the modern ideology of the nation state, the national economy and national culture. For those, inevitably, Japan is then a falling state and fading economy in its dogged resistance to the tide of globalization and its associated need to trim and become fit.

Since Japan's reality is the mixture of both, Japan watchers will have an interesting time for some time to come.

IV

Another interesting point of the Tokugawa legacy is the role of women in society.

In the 16th century, Japanese society was governed strongly by the individualist logic of the warring lords. Each one was competing with his might in pursuit of honor. The sociologist Ikegami Eiko in her book, *The Taming of the Samurai* (Ikegami, 1995), called it "honorific individualism." In medieval Japan, collectivism was not very much stressed and social organization was based on individualism as collectivistic norms were not found as a primordial principle. One can see this paradoxical attitude in the story of Ikkyu, a Buddhist monk, who fell in love with nuns one after another, breaking the norms of the Buddhist monk community. To him, the pursuit of individual desires was much more important than the communitarian norms.

What all this amounts to is that a number of feminist studies of the late medieval period seem to indicate that in such an individualistic society, women of that period were far more individualistic than one might think of modern Japanese women in what is today a much more collectivist society.

After the 17th century, a so-called early modern society was forged in each of the 300 odd domains. In other words, the honorific individualism gave way to an honorific collectivism within each domain which was transformed into collectivist organizations. At the time, collectivism started to suppress individualism. The change gave birth to a new literature.

The pet motif of Chikamatsu Monzaemon, a major playwright of *Kabuki* plays, was the dilemma between public obligations and private sentiments, the public and the private, and collectivism and individualism, the two lovers' inability to pursue their private sentiments and their consequent double suicide.

Collectivism was gradually consolidated over time to the point at which, in the mid-19th century, the collectivist logic prevailing in the society, went as far as organizing the 300 odd domains into one centralized sovereign state with, nevertheless, all their idiosyncrasies intact. Accordingly, *"messhi hoko,"* which means diminishing the private and serving the public, became the absolute norm.

Many novels of the so-called modern period are called I-novels because in them authors of modern persuasion grumbled about suppressed individualism and talked about their own private life in a depressed mood. Natsume Soseki, himself a depressed individualist, ended up with the quasi-Confucian and quasi-Kantian notion of *"Sokuten Kyoshi,"* that is following the voice of heaven and leaving the private. Of course, while men's individualism was much suppressed, women's individualism met an even worse fate.

It is only in the later part of the 20th century, I would say, the mid-1970s, that the honorific collectivism was openly challenged in what might be called the post-modern novels. Yoshimoto Banana's novels, like *Kitchen*, focused on the inner world of individuals enjoying their psychological dimensions of dense interactions. Since then, individualism has come back in society while the collectivist

legacies of the early modern and modern periods are still strong.

When individualism is making an atavistic comeback, women are also coming back as a more self-assertive and self-expressive entity and it is a most opportune evolution for the Japanese demographic decline is tangible. The age groups between 25 and 55 are rapidly becoming smaller than those before 25 and after 55.

Not only the demographic decline is tangible, but men are no longer enough. Women are therefore a welcome addition to the dwindling productive population group.

The government has sized up the problem, speeding up the process of integration. The labor law prohibiting women from working into the night has recently been revised in the opposite direction.

The old labor law wanted to protect women's rights to defend maternity. Employers did not have then much incentive to hire women as a permanent force from which future executives were picked. Hence employed women with career ambitions were largely unhappy until recently.

Under the revised law, college graduate women can choose from among (1) pursuit of a career at the cost of intermittently working late and usually very hard; (2) pursuit of "office ladies" with light routine work and with the expectation of leaving a firm in conjunction with marriage or the birth of a child; (3) pursuit of *sengyo shufu*, a pure housewife role from the start. In addition, public facilities to take care of children while their mothers are working have started to proliferate very steadily after the legislation of the revised law. Private facilities are slower to arrive but they are also coming along in the same direction.

Achievements are however much slower to come. Women are on the steady rise primarily in the public sector. In the private sector a large bulk of them are still only part-time workers. In the public sector, primary school principals and school heads have now a fairly large percentage of women, starting from some 20 years ago. In the central bureaucracy, approximately 1% of the *ka* are headed by women (a ka is the lowest department. There are many *kachos* [department chiefs] under one division and many divisions under one bureau, thus goes the hierarchy).

Photo: THE YOMIURI SHIMBUN

Childcare facilities have begun to proliferate very steadily

Still able and ambitious women go to the public sector. Besides many able and ambitious women go to multinational banks and firms where there is far less discrimination. More salient are international organizations like the United Nations where of all the Japanese employees about 80% are women.

The emerging picture is that of more women entering the full-time workforce. Yet one must be cautious that a fairly large number of women, able and ambitious, in their early 20s, suddenly switch from course (1) to courses (3) and (2) in Japan, partly because they are induced to do so by the society. But the point here is that the tide is changing steadily. And ironically, what some would perceive as progress can in a way be perceived as a comeback of the late medieval legacy and its honorific individualism.

V

Of the same order seems to be the emergence of revisionists of the Japanese Constitution among Japanese parliamentarians.

A few months before the ruling Liberal Democratic Party's presidential election of early October 1999, Yamasaki Taku, one of the three candidates, said that constitutional revision was his dream. Kato Koichi, another candidate of pacifist persuasion with respect to Article Nine, said that he would start to massage public opinion when he became prime minister so that Yamasaki, some 10 years from 1999, would become prime minister and accomplish constitutional revision.

As for the largest opposition party of the center, the Democratic Party, it elected Hatoyama Yukio as its leader, a man who is in favor of constitutional revision of Article Nine while the Liberal Party headed by Ozawa Ichiro has already been pushing the agenda of constitutional revision for some time.

That such a revision might take place in the future seems therefore likely since so many parliamentarians are talking about it, and so, one might think that Japan may have one day again a constitution that will allow the country to use military force.

Whether such a revision would constitute a fundamental change of course

Photo: The Mainichi Newspapers

The Japanese government salvaged a North Korean vessel that had illegally entered Japanese waters

for the Japanese state and its society in the direction of internationalism and a more facile use of force is a moot question at best. The arguments for revision have been largely driven by the immediate frustration felt at recent times at North Korea's missile launching and the illegal penetration of Japanese waters by alleged North Korean boats, Pakistani and Indian nuclear tests, and Chinese saber-rattling in the Taiwan straits as well as by the vague angst about the way in which the United States exercise its power.

The uproar of revisionists seems to be directed at obtaining constitutional legitimacy to enable Japan to meet challenges of sorts in a way which would work as a deterrent to potential aggressors or violators. In other words, they seem to be arguing that Japan should build armed forces so as not to be humiliated by aggressors or violators and to protect the human rights and security of Japanese citizens. If this interpretation is largely the case, a constitutional revision would not affect Japanese society and politics very much. In other words, a proposed revision of the Constitution might not contain too many things to worry about. Such a revision would look more like a largely minor constitutional amendment made a number of times in Germany for the last half a century.

But if the discontent of revisionists derives from anti-Americanism, then a proposed constitutional revision might signal something that would alert the United States about Japan. My sense is that anti-Americanism cannot grow very far in the near future given the way in which many Japanese eggs have been placed in one basket called the United States and given the way in which Japanese have developed their norms and thinking about peace and security, that is, inward-looking pacifism.

It would take one generation at least, not 10 years, as Yamasaki dreams, to achieve a constitutional revision. It seems to me that the nature of such a revision will be determined more by international environments where Japan's two neighbors, China and the United States, are likely to go through a fairly dramatic transition – quasi-democratization in China's case and quasi-isolationism in the case of the United States – in two to three decades' time than by the Japanese societal psyche, which is in the basic long transition from collectivism to individualism and in which national war mobilization has become a thing of the past.

It seems to be plainly wrong to assume that any Japanese coming to terms with armed forces immediately means the revival of Japanese militarism because the Japanese social psyche and institutions are moving away very slowly but fairly steadily from collectivism, centralization and national mobilization to individualism, decentralization and global minglings.

VI

To conclude, the social fabric, the position of women in society and the Constitution, are three puzzles that sometimes confuse many foreign observers of Japan. In my view, Japanese society should be looked at as a society shaped deeply by its long history, that is a history that goes far beyond the one-and-a-half century long national centralization and mobilization of the Meiji-Showa periods (1868-1989) that people generally refer to. Our late medieval legacy and its early modern reformulation in the Japanese society may have a much more profound influence in reshaping Japanese society in the new millennium than it is generally thought. Such an atavistic and opportune comeback of an honorific individualism may give an interesting twist to Japanese society at a time of globalization where the fragmentation of national polity, national economy and national culture, and the tremendous expansion in the number of choices available to individuals are two other irrepressible features. JJTI

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