

Japan and China in America

By *Iokibe Makoto*

As Japan's economy has plummeted, China's has risen, and the center of East Asia is shifting from Japan to China. In a China-centric Asia, Japan will soon sink into oblivion. This is the image that is spreading both in Japan and the rest of the world, but what is the real truth of the matter?

At a gathering in Cambridge, a Japanese made a passing comment that "Japan is leaving the Asian economic stage and China is emerging in its place." It seemed such a widespread view that I was interested to hear the reaction. The response from an American who happened to be nearby was a somewhat incredulous "Really?," as though he found it difficult to believe. This American had a post-graduate degree, and although he had lived in the Middle East, he had never been to either Japan or China.

The size of the Japanese economy (gross domestic product) is still four times as big as that of China. Japan is an advanced society in terms of both its economy and democratic government. Compared to Japan, China is no more than a fast-growing youth in its late teens. Nevertheless, China's sheer size, the rapid pace of its development and its achievement to become the "world's factory" create the illusion that the Chinese economy is already four times larger than Japan's. I am reminded of the futurologist at the end of the 1960s, when Japan was in the midst of its period of miraculous rapid growth, who gained fame by predicting that the "21st century will be Japan's century."

Of course, the general direction of change is clear. It used to be that, for the most part, Japanese were almost invariably the only Asians to conduct business worldwide, attend international conferences, visit tourist destinations and shop for luxury brand items. This is no longer the case. It has become common throughout the world to see

groups of other Asians chatting in loud voices in Chinese or Korean as they come and go.

It is the same here at Harvard University. A quarter of a century ago, in the 1970s, the majority of scholars invited to the Yenching Institute were Japanese. As evidenced by its name, "Yenching," the focus of this research institute was originally on China, but despite this, with no diplomatic relations between the United States and China, the Institute's director was the prominent Japanologist Professor Albert Craig, and its researchers came from a variety of Asian countries and regions, with the majority coming from Japan.

Having witnessed that situation back then, it came as a great shock to see how sharply things have changed. Of the 30 guest researchers currently invited from Asia to the Institute, half of them are from China. This is not simply a coincidence, but a systematic change brought about by the policy of the current director, who is himself of a Chinese descent. He believes that it is preferable to invite scholars from China, whose importance is bound to increase in the future. A get-together is held on Friday afternoons at three o'clock, and when I went there at the suggestion of my respected friend, I found a large group of people talking animatedly in Chinese; it was the kind of atmosphere in which people of other languages found it difficult to join in. The Japanese quota at the Institute has apparently been reduced to just three, but none of them appeared to be at this get-together.

My experiences in the wider world of how huge China has become are also too numerous to mention. In particular, the rate at which Chinese products are entering the United States is astounding. A trip to a supermarket or a shopping mall is enough to recognize that

the United States' greatest trade deficit is no longer with Japan but with China. On clothing, shoes, sports goods, daily goods and crafts, the frequency of the "Made in China" label is overwhelming. Once, in the backwoods of Oregon, I saw a Native American wooden ornament that appeared to be something that would have been crafted locally, but when I examined it more closely, it, too, was inscribed with the words, "Made in China." During last year's Halloween season in America, the stores were filled with pumpkin carvings and scary figures, and at one store I visited, the figures and the sets of tools for carving the pumpkins were all from China. They were all well made, and it was evident that China is supplying American society with products that were both low in cost and of good quality. Recently, I heard that, in the majority of cases, a considerable proportion of the inner contents of many luxury items and cutting-edge industrial products, while not expressly stated, are being made in China by subcontractors. This is the reality of China's transformation into the "world's factory."

China's rise does not, however, mean Japan's fall. From an overall perspective, the world of America is huge, and there is more than enough room for China to do what it does and Japan to do what it does. Also, for the time being, Japan has its own unique strengths. The above mentioned American who was perplexed to hear the theory of China's superiority was a very fussy city-dweller, and most of the items on his wish list, be they computers, electronic appliances or cars, were probably Japanese brands.

In such an automobile-oriented society as the United States, Toyota Motor Corp. is overwhelmingly powerful, and Honda Motor Co. is also very impressive. In the more moderately-priced



mass-market category, Subaru (Fuji Heavy Industries) and Suzuki Motor Corp. are also doing well. Among other Asian nations, South Korea's Hyundai Motor Co. has finally built up a certain status, but there are no other Asian cars to be seen. The American automobile market is, basically, dominated by American, Japanese and European cars, with some from South Korea.

When I needed to buy a computer and a compact disc player for my daughters and a printer for myself, I made my way to the big electrical appliances stores each time. On every one of those occasions, it was the Japanese brands such as Sony, Toshiba, Panasonic, Canon and Sharp that were competing against the latest American products. Besides Japan, there were a few German products to be seen, but there were no products from anywhere else in Asia. I gained the impression

that the American market for household electrical appliances consisted of American and Japanese plus German products.

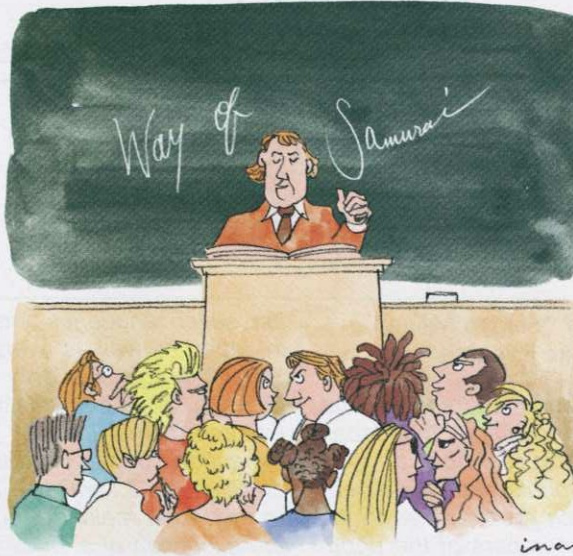
In this way, by living in American society, as well as observing the overwhelming presence of Chinese products, I experienced for myself the strong-rooted quality advantage that Japanese products have in the advanced manufacturing sector. It is also clear that China and other Asian countries are very much in their growing stages. The problem for Japan, therefore, is how well it can sustain its capacity for technological development in the advanced manufacturing sector and continue to grow.

Besides the advanced industrial products, there is another area in which Japan is proving popular. That is culture. A young woman from Colombia in South America said to me, "Japanese culture is my favorite." When I asked

her what she meant, she said that she thought that Japanese fashion, cosmetics and the like were wonderful. As I wondered which Japanese people this beautiful young woman could be referring to, another Brazilian woman said, "I like Japanese songs," and she started singing a famous Japanese song complete with a magnificent tune. When I praised her, telling her that she sounded better than most Japanese, she asked me, "What does the song mean?" Apparently, this young woman spoke no Japanese, but learned the song from karaoke at home in Brazil. The concept of culture, thus, is a very broad one, ranging from classical arts and luxury items to popular culture and even food. Because those are comparatively well known, here I would like to focus on Japanese culture as it appears at the University.

Even more than my shock at the changes at the Yenching Institute,

Illustration: Inagaki Taketaka



which I described earlier, something else at Harvard surprised me even more. Namely, it is the fact that, far from being practically empty, Japan-related lectures have actually become very popular subjects among students. In last year's spring semester, Professor Harold Bolitho's "Constructing the Samurai" course attracted the University's highest enrollment, with more than 400 students signing up for the lecture. Professor Bolitho is famous as the author of *Treasures among Men: The Fudai Daimyo in Tokugawa Japan*, and as well as his research, the theme of his lectures and his charming speaking manner have made him a very popular lecturer. Even so, Professor Bolitho's lectures are not the exception among Japan-related courses. The young Professor Daniel Botsman's "Issues in Tokugawa and Meiji History" was almost as popular as Professor Bolitho's course. Why are Harvard students flocking to lectures about Tokugawa (1603-1867) and Meiji (1868-1912) history and even further back to the Yamato period (c.a. fourth to sixth centuries A.D.) and the construction of the samurai class, subjects that seem far removed from most Japanese today? The dimension and depth of this kind of intellectual interest is a little-known wonder of the United States.

Professor Theodore Bestor made "Tokyo Culture" the theme of his lectures last year. In this way, American scholars are actively analyzing contemporary Japanese culture. Professor Bestor, a cultural anthropologist, has even written a research paper entitled, "How Sushi Went Global." Another young researcher has recently completed a doctoral thesis on professional sumo wrestling. At this student's open seminar for dissertation, there was no end to the questions from the audience and it made for a very lively occasion. Harvard University apparently plans to employ one more Japan specialist to enhance its Japan programs even fur-

ther. As far as this university is concerned, I must say that it is not a case of "shifting from Japan to China," but "both Japan and China."

Interest in culture has become very fashionable in American society today. Rather than the more strait-laced topics such as politics and foreign affairs, there is a great fuss over subjects such as culture and gender. As far as I can see at Harvard, however, again, it is not a case of "shifting from politics and foreign affairs to culture" but "both politics/foreign affairs and culture." For example, at the Kennedy School, a joint seminar entitled "Japanese Foreign Policy Decision Making 1985-2001," given by Kawashima Yutaka, a former Japanese Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs, and Professor Ezra Vogel in both the spring and fall semesters, was of an extremely high level, given that it was by a team consisting of a man who knows the real face of Japan's diplomacy from the inside and the greatest Japan scholar of our time. The participation from the post-graduate students who attended the seminar was very impressive, with a great deal of enthusiastic and lively discussion taking place on Japan's diplomacy. Harvard receives visits from many prominent politicians from both within the United States and abroad. Recently from Japan, Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro, former Secretary General of the Democratic Party Kan Naoto* and Diet-member Shiozaki Yasuhisa have visited

and given speeches or seminars, and the response from the university and the students has been very positive. Interest in these serious and drier subjects has by no means waned. The main thing is whether a lecture has the content that will stir up the intellectual curiosity of these lively young people.

Nevertheless, it is obvious that interest in familiar cultural values is growing stronger in American society and academia. It is also certain that the interest in Japanese culture is riding the wave of that trend. Fortunately, Japanese culture has enough value to offer that it can respond to the growing cultural interest. Even within the fashionable field of cultural studies, Japan-related topics have the potential to produce outcomes of a high level. What concerns me is that, when these overseas academics breathe new life into and shed new light on various aspects of Japanese culture, Japanese scholars, conversely, may pour cold water on their efforts with tired, bored reactions such as "We already knew that" or "I doubt whether Japan really has anything that good." I hope we can gain new stimulation from this trend, resonate with each other across the oceans and bring about a renaissance in Japanese cultural studies.

I have rambled on enough, so allow me to draw a somewhat abrupt conclusion. Japan's economy may lie in ruins, but the United States, released from the sense of Japan as a threat that it felt when the Japanese economy was too strong, is now entering a stage of natural interest in and fondness for Japanese culture. JTI

* Kan was elected as the new president of the Democratic Party on Dec. 10, 2002.

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