

Flexibility and Change

– The Best Method for Keeping the Old Ways –

By *Lars Vargö*

LEARNING has always been one of the main characteristics of society in Japan. Knowledge about the legal and administrative systems of China's Tang dynasty came to form the foundation of the first Japanese state, and Buddhist priests hungry for enlightenment studied the various philosophical and religious schools of the Song Dynasty. After the Meiji Restoration of the late 19th century, learning was the key to building a society that was equal to the Western powers. Official delegations were sent to Europe and the United States to study how those societies were structured and the recommendations they brought home were all pointing in the same direction. "We have to learn in order to improve; we have to study in order to become strong."

Already during the Edo period (1603-1867), curiosity was something that characterized Japanese society, despite the common conception that Japan was closed to the outside world. When the Swedish botanist and physician Carl Peter Thunberg visited Edo (now Tokyo) in the 1770s, he was struck by the detailed questions he was asked in the field of Western medicine. Japan might have been secluded, but it did not base its seclusion on a policy of ignorance. The Tokugawa officials during the former half of the 19th century knew that knowledge of the outside world was necessary; they learned what had happened to Chinese society, they knew they had to adapt, but they were too slow and rigid in their responses, and most of all, political and ideological factors in society blocked them from gaining real knowledge in time.

Already when the Boxer Rebellion was crushed in Beijing in 1900, Japan was one of the powers that participated in the quelling, side by side with the Western powers. And its troops were more disciplined than the others. It was after the Russo-Japanese war in 1904-

1905 that hubris started to grow in Japan and, in particular, it was ignorance about the true nature of Chinese society and miscalculations about Western reactions that gradually took Japan to the road of catastrophe in the 1930s and 1940s. Mishandling of real knowledge again became the recipe for defeat and humiliation.

After the war, a new process of learning started. Japanese enterprises soon mastered the knowledge-intensive industrial processes that was necessary to compete with the largest producers of the world. Japanese students went abroad and foreign students came to Japan in growing numbers. Already in the 1970s Japanese management became a concept which invoked much envy in the West. As a Swedish diplomat in Tokyo, I remember receiving delegation after delegation coming to Japan in the 1970s and the 1980s to study what the Japanese did right and we in Europe did wrong. All the important people in Sweden of that time came, trade unionists as well as major industrialists, cultural personalities as well as university professors. A few critical voices could be heard within the delegations, people who thought that Japanese success was based more on production force than on sound managerial techniques, but critics were brushed aside with the argument that "they cannot be all that wrong if they are so successful."

Then criticism against unfair Japanese trade practices grew, mainly in the United States. A couple of congressmen smashed a Japanese transistor radio on the steps of Capitol Hill and some of the things said in Congress in the late 1980s ought not to have been printed. The level of the arguments was extremely low. The same things could be said about the climate of debate in Japan. Several Japanese politicians believed that Japan was successful simply because the Japanese were on a higher intellectual

level than the Americans. Mutual knowledge about the state of things in Japan and the United States seemed to have vanished toward the end of the 1980s. Trade figures had created a veil of mutual ignorance.

In the 1990s, the economic bubble burst and the curves of success and failure took reverse directions. In the mid-1990s, Japan entered what seems to have been a period of destructive self-reproach. The new state of things was blamed on corrupt politicians and officials. The positive atmosphere – which was created when the Liberal Democratic Party's (LDP) monopoly on power was broken in 1993 and the new Prime Minister Hosokawa Morihiro spoke about "new politics," "fresh starts" and "reform" – disappeared when Hosokawa himself was suspected of having been corrupt. Hata Tsutomu took over briefly as prime minister in the coalition, but already in August 1994 the LDP was back in power. And to make things worse, they were back together with their adversaries in the former Socialist Party of Japan (SPJ). This, in my view, is what killed creativity in Japanese society for the rest of that decade. What had initially been perceived as new now looked more like another rotten apple, and the old guard must have disappointed many voters with the strange and unnatural political constellation. What was the point of politics if the LDP could join forces with the SPJ that had built its post-war ideology on its opposition to the LDP?

The earthquake in Kobe in January 1995 and the sarin attack in the Tokyo subway system in March the same year added to the feeling of hopelessness. Ten years earlier, a Boeing 747 had crashed into the Japanese mountains, killing 520 of the 524 people on board. A faulty repair in the United States was given as the reason why the tail fin blew off in mid-air. American morality was

blamed. However, when the pillars supporting the motorways in Kobe fell during the earthquake, everyone could see that Japanese workers had also cheated while doing important work. The morality was just as bad in Japan. The slow response to the earthquake and the disorganized rescue efforts were questioned all over the world. When Aum Shinrikyo topped this disappointment with a terrorist attack that sent shock waves in Japanese society equal to the Sept. 11 effect on American society, bewilderment and hopelessness spread.

The economic downturn, the political disappointment and the distrust in the efficiency of the bureaucracy helped transform Japan into a disillusioned society, seemingly void of solutions for a healthy change. I find this easy to understand, but the feeling of hopelessness is unnecessary. Sweden has gone through changes comparable to what has happened in Japan, but hopelessness has always been viewed as a failure not worthy of a civilized society. Problems are there to be solved, not to be pushed aside or become disillusioned about. And the solutions are the responsibility of the society as a whole, and not just the elected members of parliament or local assemblies. Creative answers to problems almost always come from “below,” hardly ever from “above.” That is why democracy is so important.

Both Sweden and Japan became societies where important knowledge was imported from a neighboring continent. Our survival depended on how much we knew about the trends of the ages in which we were living. However, unlike Japan, Sweden was never cut off from the rest of Europe. Sweden was constantly adapting itself to the courses of events in the European countries and various sources were always sought for development.

In modern times, Sweden has also experienced shock and trauma, although it will soon be 200 years since we engaged in war. The murder of our prime minister in 1986 and our foreign minister last year made us all feel very bewildered. The assassinations seemed

unmotivated and unnecessary, while at the same time revealing our naïveté and lack of preparation for the unexpected.

Both Japan and Sweden have been accused of putting too much emphasis on the role of government and too little on individual freedom. In the United States, it is not necessarily a good thing to be employed in governmental organizations, while in Japan and Sweden it still carries great prestige to work for the Ministry of Finance, or a state agency. Both the Swedes and the Japanese also seem to put a lot of trust in the role of the state or the local authorities in improving living conditions for the common citizen. We share the belief that government, be it central or local, has a moral obligation to take care of its citizens. Although there are important differences between our two societies, public schools and hospitals carry high prestige, while in the United States they are thought to be more of a necessary evil. In our view, care for the elderly and pension schemes are mainly a concern for our authorities, while in many other countries they are almost completely left to the individual. In Japan and Sweden the word “welfare” (*fukushi*) has positive connotations, meaning that public authorities care for the individual, while in the United States and some other countries it has a negative sound, meaning that the individual has failed.

But Sweden and Japan also differ from each other. One should not exaggerate the differences between cultures or ways of thinking, and societies are constantly changing, but one aspect that seems to separate us is our different ways of looking at education and individuality. It is my impression that it is difficult to change a professional career in Japan. Once you have chosen a profession, you are stuck with that career path for the rest of your life. If a university student starts working at the Ministry of Finance, he/she is not expected to leave government until he/she retires. Then he/she can make a so-called *amakudari*,* but changes before that time are more a sign of an inability to adapt than anything else.

Photo: THE YOMIURI SHIMBUN



The pillars supporting this expressway in Kobe collapsed during the Great Hanshin earthquake

In Sweden, you can start working for the government, one year and three years later move to a private company before moving back to government again after 10 years, or vice versa. This will not hurt your standing in the labor market. On the contrary, you will only be judged according to your experience and your skills, not whether you have moved back and forth between the public and private sectors.

The world-famous Japanese labor loyalty is gradually changing form, but it still more or less impossible for a physician to take a year off to go sailing around the world, or for a public male employee to take six months off in order to spend more time with his children. If you sail, you are not considered serious. If a husband spends time with his children instead of working, people around him would suspect that something is wrong with him. But these breaks are, according to the Swedish view, necessary if you want to have a sound society. Creativity is promoted by expanding your horizons; it is muffled by a lack of power over your own destiny.

Creativity is always greater where criticism is given room to expand. It seems to me that one of Japan's biggest problems today is that society has remained

*Note: *Amakudari*, which literally means “descent from heaven,” is the Japanese practice of bureaucrats leaving government to take up positions in the private-sector industries they once regulated.



too hierarchical and it builds too much on traditional expectations. A man is expected to reach success by climbing to the top of the social pyramid. A woman is expected to reach success by supporting her husband. There is little room for failure, yet failure is the road to success in scientific experiments. No scientist, or at least no one that I know of, discovers the truth without first misjudging the truth. How can a student know from the very beginning what he/she is good at, what kind of job he/she would like to pursue, and in what working environment he/she can best develop his/her strength? Japanese society has long been a society where the individual has to give up his or her individuality for the common good. This was also true in Sweden, but today the common good is no longer viewed as the accumulation of traditional norms, but rather as the collective will of educated and well meaning individuals.

Japan is one of the most creative societies in the world. Still, there is a common conception that the Japanese are good at copying what others have created and then taking the innovations of others to a higher level. This is an unfair description. The Japanese people

are as innovative as any other people, but a lack of self-confidence seems to permeate society.

However, Japan needs to adopt the same flexible techniques in its educational system as it has done in its production of automobiles. Japanese auto manufacturers have no difficulty in making different models or cars of different colors on the same production line, and the flexibility is very advanced. In schools, however, pupils are coming out with similar shapes and colors. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) statistics, Swedes and Japanese enjoy exactly the same level of participation in education, but the variation of schools and educational methods is much higher in Sweden. There is even a National Centre for Flexible Learning in Sweden, established in 2002.

Sweden certainly has its problems, and for many things I prefer the Japanese way, but what Japan needs, in my opinion, is a similar kind of change, putting emphasis on flexibility and innovative thinking, rather than on hierarchy and authority. Swedes are as proud of their history as the Japanese are of theirs. We have a royal house we want to keep and we have traditions that we never wish to give up. However, tradition is not the same as rigidity. If we feel secure in our traditions we can also feel secure in adapting new technologies and communication methods. If we are uncertain whether our uniqueness will disappear when confronted with the outside world, then indeed there is cause for concern. The key to keeping our uniqueness and our traditions is curiosity about what is new.

US

Lars Vargö is the Ambassador and Head of the International Department at the Swedish Parliament.