

George Webb

The New Wave

Japan in London



LET NO ONE lightly disregard the judgment of London taxi-drivers—sceptical individualists to a man, but generally fair. Ask them who are the rudest foreigners they come across, and they will provide a range of answers: a typical short list, in an order dictated by recent experiences, may include French, Arabs, and Nigerians. And who are the most courteous? Here there is no competition: the Japanese are first, the rest nowhere.

Though this tribute is undoubtedly deserved, and the politeness of the London Japanese is an asset hardly to be exaggerated, the businessmen among them are by no means always easy for British counterparts to deal with. The Japanese style of negotiation, with its ambivalent probing at the start, with its repeated referrals to Japan, with its marked preference for face-to-face meetings rather than exchanges of documents or even telephone calls, indeed with its very courtesies, can be profoundly disconcerting. Perhaps it is relevant that the two languages are constructed on wholly different lines—ours more inflected, theirs more nuanced—and this perhaps colours our respective modes of thought.

However, once a relationship of trust is established, a surprising truth emerges: the Japanese in business, contrary to popular supposition, are motivated by something more subtle, more reassuring, than mere desire for profit. A London chartered surveyor who handles major property transactions regards them as model clients, and outstandingly responsive to moral obligation, which, once incurred, they honour even when a more attractive deal suggests itself elsewhere. They are not natural gazumpers.

If courtesy and commercial dependability are impressions

that the London Japanese project, it is no bad image—and it stands up well to sceptical analysis. Thus the impact on the taxi-driver stems from various causes, including respect for the London taxi system, which the Japanese consider better than their own, with more commodious vehicles, more knowledgeable drivers, and cheaper fares. Add to this their ingrained courtesy, less-than-confident English, and natural preference for self-effacing conformity, for blending with the local scene. Given these preconditions, it is likely that unseemly argument about the route (every cabby's bane) will arise, or the tip be overlooked? Again, the favourable impact on the chartered surveyor reflects typical Japanese adherence to the cautious long-range view, whereby no immediate advantage, like snatching a short-term tactical opportunity, is justified if a foreign contact's future usefulness, or a Japanese firm's reputation, is put at risk.

Still, as an insular people, how the British do enjoy labelling foreigners—the brash American, the wily Levantine, the amorous Latin, the inscrutable Chinese! Only when the French call *us* perfidious do we discount the applicability of such facile, all-embracing epithets; at best a substitute for thought, at worst a vehicle for prejudice. When we categorise the Japanese as *polite, reliable, industrious*, the label is not so much mistaken as inadequate. They are a complex people, more variegated and individualistic than outward conformity, fondness for consensus, and apparent gregariousness might suggest. During the 120 years since the Meiji Emperor's "Charter Oath" proclaimed the objective of garnering the know-how of the world, and set the country's sights on modernisation, the Japanese have studied our culture to learn all they can from us, with a methodical seriousness that shames as much as flatters us.

For the Japanese too are nothing if not insular, indeed display some unhappy by-products of that condition—disdain for outsiders, obsession with homogeneity, tense relationships with neighbouring states—and, unlike ourselves, they never ruled a worldwide empire. But they cannot be accused of uneducated lack of interest in Britain. They have all studied English for years at school, paying far too much heed to our mechanistic grammar, too little to colloquial speech. They have earnestly sampled our literature; though on lines of selectivity not always self-apparent, with secondary works like Maugham's *Of Human Bondage* high on every set-books list. Their institutions have acquired an affluent taste for British cultural loot: nine First Folios of Shakespeare (more than we or the Americans possess) are in Japan; and among their more improbable recent acquisi-

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tions has been the complete archive of the old *Daily Herald*.

One of their common disappointments in London, a city above all whose inhabitants might be expected to have a world view, is to discover at once how little we know about Japan. We do not improve matters by shoring up our ignorance with an all-too-detectable bonding of superficial prejudice. Perhaps it was always so, and we are better than we were; but it was more excusable before the world shrank, and before Japan became its foremost creditor. Comprehend them or not, the manufacturing clout of the Japanese is such that we have been obliged to accept salutary lessons from them in industrial management; the muscle of their vastly capitalised banks is so immense that should they choose to flex it more acquisitively their impact on our entire economy would be incalculable.

For all this, though the Japanese in Britain are representatives of an economic superpower, their country is not immune from domestic problems—undeveloped social security, illiquid financial markets, excess industrial productivity, inordinate fixed costs, dreadfully corrupt politics, a fearsome criminal class, two million alcoholics, anachronistically subordinated women, constricted accommodation space, a phobia of being overhauled by the Koreans. Yet their national motivation remains formidably unimpaired, driving their economy upward in a still-ascendant graph. As for the scale of their presence in Britain, it has trebled in ten years, to 30,000. Their exported goods—before the War a byword for cheap shoddiness, now still competitive in price but of a quality that we can hardly match, backed by conscientious service—are everywhere among us. The Japanese deserve our really close attention, which it cannot be said they get.

Not that we have been oblivious to Japan. For over a century, we have formed a series of popular mental images of that country. These are of some historical interest, but have usually been more vivid than relevant, and always failed to give due prominence to one key element in Japan's astounding transformation. This element has been the inherent discipline, the quasi-religious sense of purpose, the objective of life, partly conveyed by an elusive term, *ikigai*. One aspect of this many-faceted ideal is very manifest today in the extraordinary commitment of Japanese employees to their company; another has formerly shown itself less engagingly in a cult of suicide and in the wartime "fanaticism" of Japanese troops; yet another was described in 1889 by Rudyard Kipling, after watching the incredible dedication of a Kyoto craftsman hand-polishing a single little piece of *cloisonné* ware which he would be rubbing unremittingly for months.

But though Kipling as a visitor wrote perceptively about the profundity and untiringness of Japanese commitment—particularly in their craftsmanship, whether *netsuke*-carving or railway-construction—the common view from distant Britain in 1889 was that the Japanese were "quaint". It seemed excusable to smile at their imitateness, determinedly dressing in most unbecoming Victorian clothes like would-be Europeans, and equipping themselves with Clyde-built ironclads like an aspiring naval power. Were they truly to be taken seriously? All this earnest Westernisation was much less picturesque than the intricate formalities of their lurid feudal past, which lent themselves so agreeably to Gilbertian burlesque:

*If you want to know who we are,
We are gentlemen of Japan:
On many a vase and jar,
On many a screen and fan,
We figure in lively paint,
Our attitudes queer and quaint. . . .*

Indeed, a century ago, traditional Japanese art was captivating European connoisseurs with its form of impressionism, its exquisitely stylised unreality: Oscar Wilde, again in 1889, affected to speculate that it was too beautiful to be true: "Japan is a pure invention. There is no such country, there are no such people." Such condescending whimsy, though rooted in admiration for past artistry, was unwelcome to a nation striving above all to put the past behind it and force the industrial pace; in 1901 the British Japanologist, Basil Hall Chamberlain, warned his compatriots:

"Whatever you do, don't expatiate, in the presence of Japanese of the new school, on those old, quaint and beautiful things Japanese which rouse your most genuine admiration. . . . Old Japan is dead, and the only decent thing to do with the corpse is to bury it."

From the Japanese standpoint this was sound enough, but to most Western observers Japan's unique achievement was her past artistic production, certainly not the mediocre output of her modern factories.

There were few Japanese in London in those days. Those who came were well aware that in modern terms they had a lot to learn, that their Meiji Revolution, for all its hurried programme, had not brought them anywhere near to parity with the West's immense accomplishments. They were self-consciously *in statu pupillari*, and were doubtless condescended to. The Japanese novelist Soseki Natsume, miserable in Camberwell diggings in 1901, was oppressed by the freezing demeanour of the English whom he met. They were grand, and supercilious, and he felt "like a shaggy dog among wolves".

BY THE 20TH CENTURY, however, our stereotyped view of the Japanese was undergoing some change. On the military level, after Japan's resounding defeat of China in 1894, and robust performance on our side in the Boxer Rising, it became apparent that she was indeed to be taken seriously. When Britain abandoned "splendid isolation", the country she first turned to was Japan, with whom a limited but formal alliance was signed in 1902—before the Entente with France. In the Russo-Japanese War, British sympathies were strongly with "plucky little Japan", not least when the Japanese Navy, largely British-built and trained, sensationally defeated the Russians in the Tsushima Straits. In World War I, Japan operated as an ally against Germany in the Pacific, and later played a prominent part in Siberia against the Bolsheviks. Her armed forces had raised her profile with the world and she would never be quaint again. Unfortunately, they were not disposed to let it rest at that.

In the 1920s, ominously, the Anglo-Japanese alliance was allowed to lapse. In the next decade a grim period of brutal

Japanese aggression opened, first in China, then in the arena of a wider war. Though Japan's military achievement was extraordinary, her ruthless methods provoked in her enemies such bitter detestation that strong traces of it last to this day. At its peak, that hatred was intense enough to make the use of atomic weapons seem wholly justified to end a frightful war; as such an expedient, it is still widely defended in retrospect. Even now, odious memories of wartime Japan are easily rekindled in Britain, for example by the powerful new Chinese film, *Sorghum*, or by publicity connected with the recent death of Emperor Hirohito.

Japanese in Britain are conscious of this hostile undercurrent, and were shocked by a British ex-prisoner's threat to starve himself to death (a gesture Japanese in its extremeness) in protest against Prince Philip's attendance at Hirohito's funeral. Having lost the War in atrocious circumstances, they are well placed to understand the excusable irrationality of individuals who are willing to buy Japanese products but cannot put long-past atrocities out of mind. Some also perceive, better than their compatriots at home, that their government's bland ambivalence about the causes of the War is most unhelpful. A Japanese businessman said to me, "If you have failed to forget, perhaps we have failed to remember".

However, for most of the British, the War has receded into history, and provides merely one or two of the diversity of disconnected images which the word "Japanese" evokes for us. Moreover, images from the War are now less potent than images of today, such as Japan's omnipresent photographic and electronic products, or her cars, rolling out of factories she has set up in this country, successfully managed on the most enlightened lines. We have at last arrived at that recognition of "new Japan" which Basil Hall Chamberlain was urging on us in 1901. We have belatedly attained a vision of their country which, however uninformed in detail, is more plausible to Japanese than one conditioned by anachronism or dislike, by *Rashomon* or *The Mikado* or *The Bridge on the River Kwai*. We mostly admire what we know of today's Japan: we may even wonder what Japanese who live here find to admire in today's Britain.

LET IT BE SAID AT ONCE: all generalisations uttered by non-Japanese about Japan are (except for this one) suspect. I have stated many already. More will follow: they serve a descriptive purpose, but as tools of precision they are wanting. The Japanese may be homogeneous, but they are not all similar; and when foreign residence frees them from the conformism of Japan they become less so. The number of Japanese in Britain is very large, and they have come here for diverse purposes and differ widely from each other.

Of the 30,000 who have registered with their Embassy, 16,000 live in Greater London, another 7,000 in adjacent counties. Any statistical breakdown by occupation produces figures which, being fluid in aggregate, changeable in detail and inclusive of families, are of limited utility. Loosely, however, in the London area, some 600 are here on official duty, some 2,400 as students or academics, some 400 connected with journalism, freelance writing or the arts, and over 11,000 in private sector business. The number of Japanese firms

now represented in Britain has doubled since 1984, approaching 800, and will increase further as the Single European Market of 1992, which gives some concern to Japan, draws near.

JAPANESE in London tend to cluster. Colonies of them are conspicuously entrenched in Golders Green and Finchley, and further out in Ealing, Wimbledon, and Kingston. They have attracted to themselves a fairly comprehensive range of Japanese services that depend on them: shops and restaurants, golf-courses and clubs, and a good school in Acton, insulated from the British educational system and offering 1,000 Japanese children a curriculum tailored to the desperately competitive standards they will return to in Japan. The community has its own weekly newspaper, *Eikoku News*, with a circulation of 7,000; they also patronise specialised Japanese-staffed travel and housing agencies.

Since many of them work and relax together, and appear to be diffident in our language and impenetrable in theirs, the community as a whole has gained an image of exclusivity. This apartness is not resented by the perceptive Londoner as the non-assimilability of certain other communities is resented—the Japanese are mostly too Westernised, too self-effacing for that, and are known to be not "immigrants" but birds of passage. But it is a barrier to mutual understanding, and also encourages the erroneous supposition, dear to the British propensity for myth, that all Japanese are alike—that even if they do not look alike, they think alike.

That is, of course, far from the truth. Some Japanese in London are so anglicised, so steeped in our civilisation, as to be in effect as British as we are. At the opposite pole are some, so short of viable English, so unused to being abroad, that they will never, in a few years of residence, muster the will to leave the pack of their compatriots. In between are many who, after initially gravitating to the reassuring milieu of their kind, break out of it, make their own way, discover merits in the alien scene, and become loth to leave it. This happens to some wives, finding in Britain a woman's status less subordinate than at home, yet seeing more of their husbands, and enjoying holidays in Europe. It also happens to writers, artists and intellectuals, many of whom dislike the compulsive corporate gregariousness for which Japan is famous, and find Western individualism congenial by contrast.

It cannot be an unconnected fact that London branches of even the leading Japanese firms, such as the top four investment houses, are beginning to suffer defections. Not to overstate it, what was rare is becoming less so. It is too early to say "*La Garde recule!*", but an appreciable number of well-regarded Japanese executives in major companies are resigning for other employment in London and elsewhere outside Japan. They evidently tire of the stifling corporate loyalty of the Japanese system, and notice that societies such as ours, with a lower Gross Domestic Product, can yet offer higher rewards—better housing, bigger cars, longer holidays, cheaper living costs. It will be highly interesting to see if this small trend, a symptom of something bigger, will continue.

If it does, it will not be because London is attractive *per se* for Japanese to live in. It will be because London, and the West more generally, is perceived as offering something that Japanese are beginning to desire, but that their own society is not yet ready to provide. That “something” will be a matter of attitudes—social acceptance of consumption as against thrift, of display of wealth as against self-effacement, of enjoyment of leisure as against obsessive industry. If Japan, against the tendency of her culture, moves that way, it will be because her great wealth, and the pressures of an increasingly “post-industrial” economy, will make it easy, if not inevitable, to do so.

For reasons of national character, the likelihood would at present seem remote, were not some symptoms of change already visible. Though the level of personal saving in Japan remains extremely high, self-denial from conspicuous consumption by individuals is too unnatural to be indefinitely sustained, given the Gross Domestic Product available to fuel it. (In 60 years, Japan’s population has multiplied by 2, her GDP by 18: comparable figures for the USA are 2 and 6, for the United Kingdom 1.2 and 3.5.) In Tokyo, this affluence is giving rise to new phenomena which run counter to Japanese tradition—taste for luxury, reluctance to conceal wealth, impatience with austerity. It is a tribute to Japanese self-discipline that this aspect of consumerism has taken so long to rear its head. In London it is the norm; Japanese in London may well judge whether their country is going the same way, and may help the process.

TO TURN BACK from the future to the present. In general, Japanese businessmen in London came simply because they were sent by their firms, their wives following because they were dutiful; the question of wanting to leave Japan or choosing to come to England will have been secondary. However, they will on the whole have regarded London as a good posting. For some, the anticipation of speaking English, studied for ten years at school but never before put to use, would be attractive, much more so than the prospect of learning a new language. For others, a tour in London as a centre of world finance would be obviously good for a career. For a friend of mine, on his first posting outside Japan, the unexpected sight of cherry in blossom as he drove in from Heathrow quite won his heart, and outweighed all his initial frustrations over housing. For all, the prospect of a cost of living lower than at home, and of finding Japanese goods cheaper in London than in Tokyo (what we unkindly call “dumped” exports), would amount to an inducement in advance.

In some few cases, to travel hopefully will have proved more pleasant than to arrive, but the usual experience of Japanese is to enjoy London. However, to establish the pattern of their tastes and preferences would need a poll, which is beyond my scope. All I have done, seeking impressions, not statistics, is to elicit the views (which were not identical) of such few businessmen, officials, and their families as I had ready access to. I have struck out as irrelevant the more subjective absolutes—endurance of the weather, enjoyment of the theatre, difficulties with English, homesick-

ness for Japan, even the infuriating tiresomeness of being assumed to be Chinese. I will confine myself to some few comparisons which seem revealing.

Alas, we are ruder than we thought, especially on the service side, in shops, post offices, and even banks. Ungracious offhandedness is often taken as positive discourtesy, especially when compared with the exceptionally attentive standards of Japan. As a schoolgirl commented to me, “Shop assistants in Japan are very polite, to gain a good reputation for the shop”, whereas “the attitude of the sellers here can be, well, inappropriate”. This matter of ill-demeanoured service, among the strongest of first impressions, lingers as a persistent irritation, especially if compounded by another nasty factor: as the same girl politely but firmly noted, “Asians are often treated differently”. The manners of British drivers, too, seem worse than in Japan, and no Londoner will be surprised that heavier exhaust pollution than in Tokyo, and less parking space, make driving an ordeal, while the Underground is seen as unnecessarily filthy and discredibly unsafe.

As to crime in general, in any comparison with Japan London comes off humiliatingly badly: it is not just a matter of visitors’ shocked impressions, but of published statistics which have not been seriously questioned: in Britain you are three times as likely to be murdered, eight times as likely to be raped, and fifty times as likely to be robbed, as in Japan. (Western European figures are roughly comparable with ours, American figures conspicuously worse.) The ugly prevalence of mugging in the London streets is a blight to which the Japanese here are especially sensitive. It is not, they explain, that Japan has no criminal class: her legendary mafia-style *yakuza* are a byword for terroristic gangsterism: but they prey on each other and their like, rather than on the innocent public, and burglaries are largely deterred by intensive community policing.

ON THE CREDIT SIDE, which is happily extensive, sophisticated Japanese are full of praise for the great range of high-grade entertainment available in London—music, cinema and theatre—and consider it better, more various and cheaper than its Tokyo equivalents. They also enjoy the serious sightseeing—museums, galleries and historic places—and pay tribute not only to the fine condition of buildings and their contents, but (in this case) to the service that goes with them, and its assured handling of the foreign visitor. They are impressed by the size and beauty of London’s parks: these are indeed by any standard extensive, seven times more so *per capita* than the parks of Tokyo. They are pleased, too, by the larger size and lower rental of the houses and flats they find for themselves. Less agreeable can be the discovery that not all artisans are skilled, nor landlords as punctilious as at home: one of my friends declares that an abiding memory of England will be his struggle with his landlord—still in the balance after many months—to get some broken paving slabs replaced.

The international diversity of London’s restaurants is attractive to the Japanese, and partly compensates for what some see as a disappointing lack of the tea-shops and cafés

that proliferate in Japan; as for London's Japanese restaurants, these tend to be regarded as high-priced, only to be patronised by those on expense accounts. Specialised Japanese food shops are expensive too, and most Japanese in London quickly become accustomed to British groceries and supermarkets. These have shortcomings—slow and slapdash service, lack of variety in the Japanese staples of fish and vegetables—but they offer a wide range of unaccustomed foods to which most Japanese quite readily adapt. It is mistaken to think of the Japanese in London as obsessively centred on their own community with no outside recourse, eating and drinking only their familiar imports from home, and spending their evenings crooning nostalgic songs against a background tape in the insulated conviviality of a *karaoke* bar.

Another mistaken image that we have relates to their motivation. Being ourselves conditioned to think in Western terms of individual people as “economic animals” and of companies whose purpose is to maximise their dividends, we observe with uncomfortable awe the workaholic Japanese, sacrificing their family life in the struggle for ever-higher efficiency; and we presume that they are economic animals, or ants, more highly motivated than ourselves. In fact, they are inheritors of a post-Confucian ethic, which instils in them a regard for hierarchy, obedience, and hard work; and for the national interest certainly, which is not the same as vulgar profit. It is no coincidence that they share this ethic with Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore, all successful economically. The profundity of the Confucian motivation is attested by the sincerity with which they sing their remarkable company songs, which are all about harmony, the joy of service, and the ideal of the public good.

As for what they are doing here in London, particularly with their massive banking operations, there are two opinions. The Japanophobe view is that they plan to take over our financial institutions. The more sanguine conjecture is that they have no such aim: that although Japanese banks now handle over a third of all the banking assets in Britain, much of this activity is in local authority financing and not in the classic private sector; that the Japanese have come to London because it is the banking focus of the world, and because they have money to spend and have to use it somehow; that private consumption in Japan is still so restricted by custom that excess money has to find an outlet. (In the 1970s it found it in “sovereign debt” of Third-World countries; but the Japanese, like our own bankers, burnt their fingers in that venture.) What could now be more natural than to operate in a banking role abroad, as the British banking system did in its 19th-century heyday? and where more natural than in London, the world's financial entrepot?

If this last view is correct, we are wrong to argue, as the British Government argues, that reciprocity of deregulation is important, and that Tokyo should be as unrestricted for foreign business as the City. On the contrary, the great strength of the City as a financial centre is its uniquely open door, compared with the restrictiveness of its foreign rivals. That comparison with over-regulated New York brought us the post-War Eurocurrency market. The same comparison with the inflexibility of Tokyo retains for London the banking turntable of the world. Let others come to us. In this real sense the Japanese in our midst are helping to sustain our lead over Continental centres of finance, are increasing our tax revenue, are making employment. For this—as for other reasons—we should welcome them.

Cohabitant Kinds

Silent, I knead my clay. Chieko's loom
Clack-clackets as she weaves. A working mouse
Gnaws at a peanut dropped to the floor of the room
For which some sparrow-freeman of our house,
Pecking, competes. A mantis perched on the line
Sharpens its sickles; while, with a hop-skip-jump,
Hunting blue flies, some spider darts to dine.

Hung towels stir in the draught. With a sudden thump
The mail arrives. The hands of the clock grind round.
An iron pot, like a squat black cat-thing, purrs
And hibiscus-leaves, green tongues stuck out, astound
The air with impudence. Then, as the earth-fish stirs
And a small ground-tremor sets the whole place shaking,
Nervous cicadas instrumentalise
Their sense of the world as a thing of a single making.

For all these things and creatures, pots and flies,
Are mustered in patterns reflecting some master-fit.

And the noon-sun, huge, burns down, straight down, on it.

Takamura Kotaro 1883-1956

Translated by Graeme Wilson