

## Reviews

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Karel van Wolferen, *The Enigma of Japanese Power, People and Politics in a Stateless Nation* (Macmillan London, 1989, pp. 658)

Given its location in the Far East, westerners and other foreigners need a dependable standard text book about Japan. Compared with the rest of the world, Japan is extraordinarily unique. This uniqueness, however, does not stem from race or nationality, although many Japanese so believe. Any nation could be similar to Japan, if its global location and historical background were comparable. Given this assertion, Japan, nonetheless, is at least very peculiar, if not distinctively strange. To relationship, with Japanese, foreigners have an urgent need for a reliable guidebook.

Professor Chalmers Johnson's book on MITI (*MITI and the Japanese Miracle*, Stanford University Press: California, 1982) has long been accepted as the standard for this purpose. Now, after more than eight years, a revised version has been anticipated, and Van Wolferen's present work will fill the gap.

We Japanese do actually live in the kind of world and society that Van Wolferen describes. Japan is a society in which a small elite group has historically controlled, and even now controls, every phase of that society, including its government, administration, businesses, means of communication, education and other social institutions. Japan continues to be involved in the process of modernization, internationalization, and democratization. In order to protect its interest, the elite group, or "system", will even use power of the nature of *yakuza* (associated with gangster of the *Tokugawa* era).

As Van Wolferen contends, in Japan nobody assumes final responsibility. This fact is reflected in many phases of Japanese society; in domestic as well as international affairs Japan is lacking in basic principle. Things are determined, at least super-

ficially, in harmonious ways or consensus building, which is most respected. (Paradoxically, however, consensus building is totally ignored if it is perceived as dangerous to the "system"). Most reforms or important changes in Japanese society have been attempted only when pressure has been felt from abroad, especially from the United States. Again, however, it is paradoxical that if the Japanese are pushed too hard, suddenly they become upset and excessively nationalistic.

As a corollary to lacking basic principle or a sense of responsibility, the Japanese apology or excuse means virtually nothing. From top to bottom, Japanese people find it unusually easy to say "sorry" or "pardon me". These statements mean less than "good morning".

Sometimes to be Japanese is very difficult, even for one who is pure Japanese. Recently, 74 hostages were released by Iraq. Not one of them expressed anger against Saddam Hussein for his misconduct. Nor did they express joy upon returning home. They referred only to their colleagues who continued to be detained in Iraq. (Perhaps the home country media did not show anyone in their anger toward Hussein.)

When Iraq invaded Kuwait August 2, 1990, the Japanese government was not immediately committed to the idea of supporting the United Nations, nor was it committed to providing any means of support. Prime Minister Kaifu initially manifested publicly that he did not contemplate sending abroad representatives from the Japanese Selfdefence Force. Later he reversed his position and sought legislation approving an expeditionary force to the Middle East. The public, however, responded negatively and Kaifu and his supporters were forced to withdraw the proposed legislation. Following that development, no one was willing to assume responsibility for the changes in the official attitudes of the Japanese government in deploying the Selfdefence Force in the Middle East Crisis.

Japan's largest opposition group, the Socialist Party and Shin Kanemaru, a powerful leader of the

Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), worked together in negotiations and the establishment of international relations with North Korea. This was an unusually strange development. Who represents Japan? How can socialists and liberalists work together? Kanemaru is only an LDP party member, not a government official. This development emphasizes the lack of a basic principle in ideological difference.

In the process of negotiating with North Korea, Kanemaru promised reparations for damages caused by the Japanese for 45 years after the war. However, the definition of 45-years-damage was obscure, notwithstanding Kanemaru's statement that it referred to the rate of interest for unpaid reparations. He was criticised by both the Japanese and South Koreans, however, the apology means virtually nothing, inasmuch as Japan did nothing for South Korea.

November 1990 was a difficult month for Japanese commoners, with many events relating to the Emperor's accession to the throne. For the average Japanese, Imperial Palace manners and customs appeared eccentric and strange. To the commoner, they were highly unusual and uncommon. Although the Ministry of Imperial Household maintains that these customs originate from the Heian era in the 1200s, we are not too sure about it. The strangest event was the ceremony of *Daijosai*, in which Emperor Akihito became god (the Ministry denies it, citing provisions of the Japanese constitution). Also on this occasion the government spent a huge portion of the national budget. In his deep silence Emperor Akihito did not speak as a god, he followed strange customs, and said nothing about the magnitude of expenditures related to the ceremony. His silence reminded Japanese of the silence of former Emperor Hirohito at the Outset of World War II.

Indeed, Japan is a difficult country to live in, even for the Japanese. Van Wolferen's book accurately presents true pictures of present-day Japan. In that sense, it is a good book, especially for foreigners.

historical events. Obviously he knows a great deal about oriental philosophies, including Confucianism, Taoism and Shintoism. In my opinion, however, these ideologies have minor influence in contemporary Japanese life, for only a few people are familiar with them. Also, there is a lack of linkage between his treatment of historical events and present-day Japan; there is a logical gap between his historical observations and actual facts. Further elaboration upon this linkage should have been included in his principal line of thought.

2. Van Wolferen extends substantial credit to former Prime Minister Nakasone. In my opinion, Nakasone's contribution to the modern history of Japan is almost negligible. Many Japanese are ashamed of him and would like to forget him.

3. Although Van Wolferen severely criticises the Japanese establishment (dominated by graduates of Tokyo University Law School), the tone of his book suggests a continuation of the establishment. He frequently quotes Amaya Naohiro, a typical representative of Tokyo University alumni and professors at Tokyo University. It would be more prudent if the author had totally parted from those people and spoken in his own words.

4. Van Wolferen's final proposal for the Japanese people is a bit disappointing. Abolition of Tokyo University, while helpful, would contribute little to improving Japan. It is only one factor. The Japanese people must try harder. There exist far too many local mini-Todais (small Tokyo Universities) in Japan. We must upgrade the higher education system in Japan.

In his concluding remarks to the Japanese edition, the translator expresses elation that Van Wolferen's book has been translated into so many different languages. Although I find most of the author's work acceptable, I cannot share in the exuberance of the translator. It must be emphasized yet again that Japan is indeed a very difficult country to live in for rational people.

Shigeo MINABE

*Here are some comments about the book:*

1. The author's knowledge of Japanese history is impressive. He energetically explores individual

D.H. Whittaker, *Managing Innovation: A Study of British and Japanese Factories*. Cambridge University Press. 1990. pp. 205. price GBP 25.

Some people are getting bored by the stream of books and articles on the glories of Japanese industrial performance and comparisons between Western countries and Japan. If you are bored, do read on nevertheless. This book is particular in a number of ways. It has little on social values, enterprise harmony and the roots of cooperativeness in the rice paddies of medieval Japan. But it is bolstered by extensive original field research of the author in metal-working firms in *both* countries, supplemented with substantial experience of living and working in Japan. In that way, it is similar to that of the author's mentor, Ronald Dore. Whittaker has become immersed in Japanese culture to an extent which exceeds the experience of most other authors who write on Japan, by far.

The book analyses ways of coping with CNC (Computer Numerically Controlled) machine-tools in the employment and organization systems of both countries. Anglo-Japanese differences revolve around the distinction between technical and craft approaches, market and enterprise oriented employment systems. This might have been expected. Yet, the analysis is highly intriguing. It unearths variation which has not yet come to light in other international comparisons of CNC use. Surprisingly, Japanese CNC programmers have much less shop-floor experience than British ones. On the other hand, Japanese CNC shop-floor personnel have a wider range of tasks including programming tasks. Together, the findings make sense: In Japan, shop-floor and programming work are integrated right on the shop floor, rather than in a planning office by technicians with shop-floor experience, which is what happens in Britain.

The author reiterates the value of known predictors of the division of labour: batch size and plant size. But in Britain, batch size is the more powerful predictor, whereas it is plant size in Japan. The book is full of such findings which show

the relativity of relationships between whichever variables. Each societal context tends to breed its own specific logic, which conditions the precise direction and extent that relationships have. A nice example occurs in training: There is close and intensive supervision of workers in Japan, but this is of a facilitating kind, helping young workers to pick up the job. By comparison, the British worker is only loosely supervised. Hence, British firms make a bigger effort to provide or buy separate further training in CNC than Japanese companies! Would you have thought of that? Again, looked at together, the findings make eminent sense.

But the comparative picture which the author paints is very complex and requires great attention when reading the book. In fact, the central typologies put forward to organize differences and explain them, are not of that much use in realizing how and why things are different in the way they are. Going clichés fail, and the reader should not imagine that he or she can unravel the mysteries of such differences by the use of one or two punchy binomial typologies. The book is also valuable in that it teaches us not to expect this. When you have worked your way through it, you will understand the social architecture of firms in the two societies much better, not only in the nasty details, but also the overall web of intricate interrelations. The lesson for me, much more than the author explicitly admits, is that you learn about the general pattern by painstakingly tracing intricate interrelationships, rather than by deriving the details from an explicit overarching set of hypotheses and types. In this way, the present book, although it is an academic one, is in fact close to the frame of mind of the engineer or engineering manager, besides dealing with a subject that is close to their heart.

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