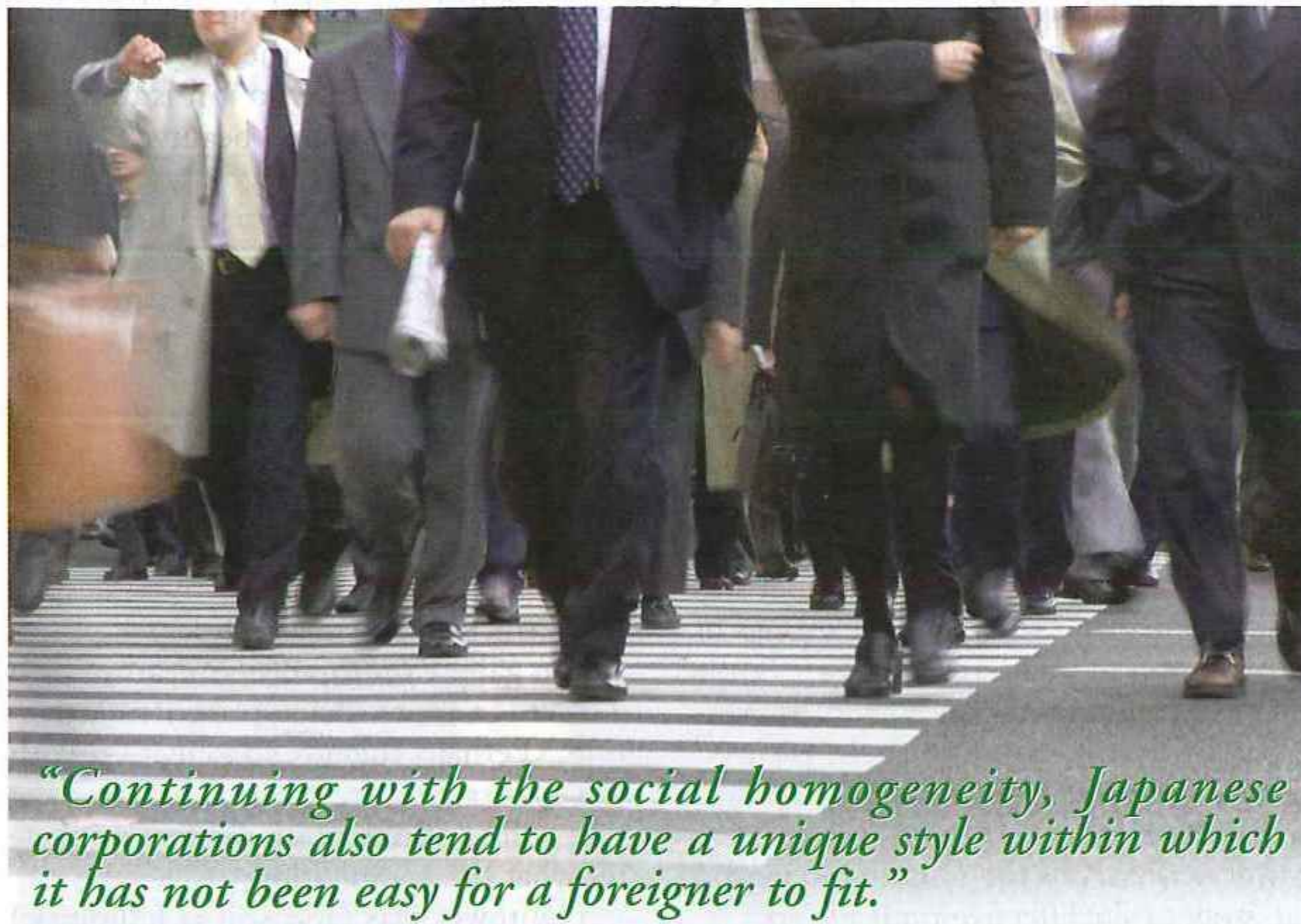


Japan: a Maze of Perceptions

By Sanjeev SINHA



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Global Eyes

LET'S take a quick look at how international perceptions are shaped in modern times. The spread of and access to information have been increasing ever since civilization began, but the present times are of an unprecedented nature. Real-time media is accessible to a majority of people, helping to shape the perception of one part of the world to another in real time as well. Computers, the Internet and telecommunications have made it possible to actively seek, communicate and analyze information in nearly real time as well, which effectively makes informed action of an international nature easy and thousands of times faster than a century ago. Global trade and financial markets result in brand ambassadors of the likes of Toyota and Sony. With globalization proceeding as mentioned above, major countries such as Japan are often in the media of various countries for matters of global economics and policy.

With the free market economy,

democracy and capitalism, opinion of the masses plays a crucial role in significant matters. Hence, now we see very active mass advertising for matters of global policy and image of a country as well. And especially with developed countries such as Japan, global travel and immigration have become commonplace both from within and from without. Hence, in all, there is a very intricate and multi-faceted mechanism that shapes the perception of Japan, or for that matter any other country, in the eyes of the rest of the world.

Next let's look at how the above factors in a Japanese context have contributed to the perception of the country. Many aspects are directly related to the relative homogeneity of Japanese society and many others are also deeply rooted there.

As Seen from Outside

The economic homogeneity of Japan leads to a very high internal demand for products and services of a similar nature. While many Japanese brands such as Sony and Toyota are world-famous, there

are a large number of domestic products and companies that are more sophisticated and bigger than their international counterparts but almost unknown outside of Japan. Due to large internal demand, such Japanese companies did not bother themselves with the difficulty of internationalization, including brand promotion.

This makes it intuitively more difficult for a foreigner abroad to understand what makes Japan the second largest economy in the world. An occasional encounter abroad with rather carefree Japanese tourists extravagantly spending money affirms the affluence of Japanese people, but it also confuses a local foreigner on the economic wisdom of Japan. The high level of comfort of dealing with uniform standards of business and customer service in Japan makes a Japanese tourist appear especially naive in dealing with the diverse and sometimes deceitful situations abroad.

The linguistic homogeneity both supports and is also supported by the internal demand. Additionally, with the economic might, the literature of the world could be translated into Japanese and Japan did not care about learning English so much, at least not out of economic interest. Lack of English led to a weakness in the proxy wars of brand- and policy-shaping in the world, which heavily depend on the mass media. Japanese media, being in *Nihongo* (Japanese language), hardly has had any place in perception management in the world. The modesty of Japanese society, deeply rooted in the culture, has also kept Japan highly underestimated by the international community. This modesty, combined with political pressures since the Second World War and economic pressures of more recent times, often leads to lack of confidence and confusion among the general Japanese public, which gives rise



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to various complexities in the Japanese psyche and even leads to international policy- and diplomacy-level implications.

Brand Consciousness

An artifact of the homogeneity is also a very high degree of brand consciousness. Such consciousness in Japan is very evident in consumer products, e.g. fashion goods, and also leads to a highly segregated perception towards foreigners. It's very common to hear that someone is like such and such because he or she is a foreigner or a Japanese.

The country's society has a very strong code of conduct and tends to brand Japanese people with their backgrounds, e.g. social class, employment and education. Foreigners are branded depending on the country they are from. People from certain countries are much more respected than others, without much relation to individual qualities.

Non-legal Society

Specially contrasting with the United States, Japan's homogeneity is a result of an almost smooth cultural evolution over a long history. The cultural diversity of US society requires a strict legal framework for an unambiguous interpretation of the rules of society, which are free from the cultural inclinations to a great extent. On this point Japan greatly differs. Japan has an almost uniform base of rules, morality and mannerism that is founded on homogeneity and long-term cultural continuity. Business in Japan is still mostly done based on relationships and personal trust. The right and wrong are decided based on subtle cultural factors.

The lack of written or legal documentation in Japanese business practices makes it more difficult for a foreigner to start business in Japan. This lack of documentary transparency in the Japanese economy is a common point of criticism of Japan. To some extent the lack of legal groundwork in Japanese lending activities is what led the Western methodologies to undervalue Japanese banks' loans to domestic corporations

and hence the unduly heightened sense of crisis of nonperforming assets in the recent decade.

Safe, Clean & High Tech

There are various nice qualities worth mention in Japanese culture. Japanese people are well known for honesty, sincerity and commitment. The economic homogeneity of society and hardly any people with abject poverty result in a very low rate of economically motivated crimes. A strong social conscience and an aversion to public attention and strangers further support the state of low crime in society. The uniform and relatively rich lifestyle along with the social conscience also makes Japan a very clean and convenient place with very rich public facilities.

The presence of vending machines and nicely equipped bus stops in very remote areas without need for any elaborate security are testimonies to this. The uniform and rich lifestyle in Japan makes it a paradise for producers of high-quality and expensive products. How the new mobile phones with better features are launched in the market many times a year and sold out shows this. The homogeneity leads to great economies of scale and makes it easier to implement and sell technology that integrates various parts of life, e.g. mobile phones that are widely used as GPS, electronic cash to buy anything from groceries to soft drinks at vending machines and mobiles themselves working as tickets for trains, airlines, buses and concerts. While similar technologies are available in other parts of the world, what is remarkable about Japan is how commonly such products are purchased and used here.

Employment & Internationalization

Continuing with the social homogeneity, Japanese corporations also tend to have a unique style within which it has not been easy for a foreigner to fit. The concepts of lifelong employment and the age- and seniority-based compensation system are not attractive to a foreigner who naturally comes with a competitive mindset leaving the comfort zone of his

or her own country. In recent years, with the international competition that even threatens the employment market and areas of its key strength, Japan has started to realize the need for internationalization. With that comes the need for the English language and marketing a broader range of Japanese products and services to the rest of the world. This includes immigration to complement the domestic skills and graying demography of Japan. And with that we see a growing acceptance of foreigners in traditional Japanese businesses as well as new companies with a fundamentally international and competitive work environment.

Cultural Transformation

On the cultural front, Japan is going through a major transformation, much bigger compared to many other parts of the world. The traditional Japanese values and practices are being challenged and given up and the new systems modeled on the West are being adopted. The process of transformation, further complicated by the demographic challenge and the youth migration to major cities, has implications for family values. Marriages are on the decline and divorces on the rise while females, on average, are still not enough empowered, socially and economically, to lead an independent life. This shows in occasional strain in family lives and related crimes.

The barrier of language, a small exchange of people, lack of self-promotion out of modesty, an inward-looking economy and lack of presence in international media all keep the country hidden from the outer world and only a foreigner living in Japan for long enough to overcome the initial language hurdles comes to see the real material and social aspects of the Japanese lifestyle.

No wonder the island country, insulated for centuries, continues to intrigue the international community. **JS**

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