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Tokyo teems with buzz

Some Japanese traditions, such as jobs for life and fitting in above all else, are falling away as the country adjusts to the Internet society, the Tribune's Michael A. Lev writes

Michael A. Lev, Tribune staff reporter
October 28, 2007

TOKYO

Akiko Fujimoto, a 31-year-old saleswoman, pulled out her shiny magenta cell phone with Internet access and did something utterly daring: She logged onto a social networking site called Mixi to confide in some friends.

So routine in America that MySpace.com and other sites seem to have replaced hanging out for young people, the way urban Japanese have embraced the Internet to share feelings and experiences is thrilling not just to users but to some scholars. They say this rigidly structured society has never before encouraged the kind of personal, opinionated and sometimes messy way of communicating that can define Americans.

And it's about time.

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banking crisis left over from Japan's heady 1980s overexpansion, setting the table for a swath of deregulation that encourages business investment.

Tokyo even looks and feels different compared to the lost decade of the 1990s. The economy is growing again, and a capital that once clung to its traditional self-image of mainly low-slung neighborhoods -- nothing too showy that might overshadow the Imperial Palace -- is now shooting skyward. Three extraordinary new developments, each a dramatic city-within-the-city, finally give Tokyo the reality many foreigners assume always existed. Called Tokyo Midtown, Roppongi Hills and Shiodome Shiosite, the neighborhoods are futuristic, international and very high-energy.

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The puzzle of Japan is whatever happened to that country, which once seemed poised to take control of the global economy but has been bypassed by the reality and the myth of China.

Japan remains the world's second-largest economy, as influential as ever when it comes to certain industries like cars and robots. But otherwise it seems overlooked, except by those who know Japan's anime cartoons, its baseball exports or that guy from the network TV show "Heroes." Can you name Japan's prime minister?

This does not mean Japan does not matter. Its extraordinary wealth demands attention, and its aggressive posture as an overseas investor puts it in the mainstream of the global economy. If Japan is able to grow consistently, it becomes a bigger market for U.S. goods, a stronger participant in global trade and a healthier ally for the U.S.

Japan changed the world once through its success, forcing Detroit's automakers, for example, to raise their game or perish. It can happen again. But if Japan does not grow and adapt, it will be left behind, a perilous proposition for a country that is aging and shrinking in population, with an enormous bill coming due as retirees mount.

I lived in Japan as a Tribune correspondent from 1996 to 2000, chronicling its failure to recover from the disastrous late-1980s period of economic overexpansion and collapse that came to be known as "the bubble." Moving on to China in 2000 to write about a country on the rise, Japan became easy to ignore, having slid through three recessions.

Since then, China's explosive growth has kept the world rapt, and I no longer had any clear answer to the whatever-happened-to-Japan question. So I returned recently for a visit.

You cannot understand a country in a few days, but you can meet Osamu Higuchi, notice his wispy goatee, cool red spectacles and untucked shirt and recognize the new Japan.

Ten years ago when a reporter wanted to interview a Tokyo business figure, the subject was most typically a gray-haired, gray-suited executive, or "salaryman" as they're called, who spoke little English and worked for a big company known as a trading firm, which had its tentacles in all sorts of investments. We would have met at the stately Hotel Okura for breakfast and talked in polite, exasperating generalities.

Now here was Higuchi, meeting me at a hotel in Shiodome, an awesome collection of wedge- and cube-shape skyscrapers, to talk about "the attention economy," his notion that the only way to be successful is to stand out in the crowd, a noteworthy comment in a group-oriented society where, as the old saying goes, the nail that sticks up gets hammered down.

Higuchi is a product of the old system, in which all college graduates joined their companies on the same day each spring, so he knows the exact date, April 1, 1985, that he went to work for Sony. But Higuchi was early to the entrepreneur track, speaks English, runs a high-tech incubator that has launched a bunch of companies and, at age 45, he half-jokes that "in our portfolio, the president is under 30 years old. We don't trust anybody over 30."

I spoke to several other entrepreneurs, like Satoshi Koike of NGI Group, who made a bundle investing in Mixi and gets daily inquiries from start-ups looking for funding. And true to their restless spirits, each one was unhappy with the status quo. They are high-profile success stories but still feel like interlopers, underappreciated by the mainstream and tarnished by a few scandals.

"Once there is any kind of innovation and the media takes notice, if something goes wrong there is a backlash," Koike said.

A country like Japan that cherishes the status quo and doesn't emphasize individual behavior is not going to change quickly. Some argue that Japan is still moving forward glacially. "No country or society ever remains unchanged," noted Richard Jerram of Macquarie Securities, a longtime Japan hand with a skeptical view.

But the significance is that when I arrived in Tokyo in 1996, there was no one to debate

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on issues like the rise of entrepreneurship or the extent of creative destruction in the economy -- because there was so little.

So it was striking during my visit to sit in the ballroom of a private club and attend a conference on mergers and acquisitions in Japan that would never have been held in the 1990s. Back then, no one wanted such things, especially acquisitions by foreigners. Today, the French control Nissan; Citibank owns a major brokerage; Sony is run by a Briton with Hollywood ties; and a New York hedge fund, Steel Partners, became public enemy No. 1 when it tried, but failed, to buy a Japanese sauce company.

Workers' fate a concern

Against that backdrop, larger changes have been disconcerting to many. The ratio of part-time and temporary workers has grown from 10 percent or 15 percent of the population to 34 percent, freeing companies from the financial obligation of carrying employees for their entire careers. The temporary workers also earn less, leading to worry about a growing disparity between the rich and poor. For a country that values harmony and does not lavish tens of millions on CEOs, allowing some workers to get left behind represents a striking transformation.

Word out of the conference was that Japanese M&A isn't where it should be, and any American CEO who attended wouldn't have recognized the timidity with which Japanese executives approached the issue of layoffs. To Americans, they are regrettable but necessary. To Masaki Kikugawa, president of Willcom, a telecommunications company, they are a "last measure." But that's different than being a taboo. During my four years in Japan, I never found a large company that had reduced head count to improve profits.

Andy Meyers, a business consultant who travels between New York and Japan and has a long history in the country, including several years as an adviser to U.S. Ambassador Walter Mondale, said what strikes him is the generational change under way and the break between the interesting "new" economy and the staid old one.

"I would definitely make the argument that it's much easier to do an IPO in Japan now than in the United States," Meyers said. "Start-ups are what's exciting and fun about the Japanese economy now. I do very little work with the trading companies, but when we were back in Japan it was hard to do much without running into them."

Mixi makes it easier to open up

Mixi, the social networking site, defines the extraordinary potential of the new economy. It started in 2004 and made an instant billionaire of its founder when it went public last year.

The Japanese have a different relationship with computers and the Internet than Americans. Commuting long distances and living in cramped expensive homes, urban Japanese don't spend hours glued to computer screens; they access the Web most frequently from their cell phones. There's even a cell phone accessory for sale to block eavesdroppers on crowded trains from stealing a glance at e-mail: a sticky plastic screen shield that blocks peripheral peeking.

It's on the train that people like Akiko Fujimoto use Mixi to communicate as a part of virtual groups. The fact that you need an invitation to join and can use an anonymous screen name encourages users to open up about feelings in a way that isn't routinely endorsed in a hierarchical, rather formal society. She said she gets objective advice on her relationship with her mother and hears stories about others' pregnancies and marital issues that she would never be privy to otherwise.

"Mixi has really expanded my life," she said. "I have Mixi friends -- a doctor or a tax accountant -- who I wouldn't be friends with in real life."

Others agree that Japan's social structure doesn't lend itself to crossing relationship barriers easily. With more than 10 million members on Mixi, most of them young and urban, learning to communicate a different way, the implications are real.

Hideo Yamazaki, the scholar and Mixi author, cites examples like the nurse who got advice and encouragement in dealing with a boss. Traditionally, the nurse would have been required to settle her differences through proper channels, or suffered. Now there was Mixi, creating an opportunity for going outside of the organization. "People are taking care of each other on Mixi."

This notion, he said, of crossing relationship barriers is new and points the way to a more flexible society, where people will feel less tied to traditional organizations. The implications for Japan, already moving away from the practice of lifetime employment, are potentially enormous, and suggest a country in transition.

"We're going to have some sort of 'crossover organization' society -- maybe a more European society," Yamazaki said. "Americans are too positive. Maybe we'll follow Europe."

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