

Japan's younger generation shuns the world stage

By ROBERT DUJARRIC
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In most societies, the young are more globalized than their parents. They communicate more easily across cultural and linguistic barriers and want to expand their horizons beyond the confines of their homelands. Many South Koreans are a prime example of this trend.

In Japan, however, the reverse is true. The establishment's elders, now in their 70s or above, are sometimes remarkably internationalized. Having come into adulthood when the country was still reeling from the cataclysms of war and struggling to catch up with the "advanced countries," they felt the urge to learn from the outside world.

Younger Japanese, however, are more inward looking. Brought up in a nation that ranks at the top of league tables in wealth and technology (and in the No. 1 slot when it comes to urban infrastructure and cleanliness), they never lived through the poverty and bombed-out cities which defined the formative years of their elders. Staying at home, enjoying the comforts of Japanese civilization and the predictability of a career in a big corporation or in government is perfectly satisfying to them.

Additionally, opportunities not previously available, such as cheap flights overseas and Internet-delivered foreign videos and music, give them a glimpse, but a superficial one, of exotic lands and peoples.

As a result, it is rare to see younger Japanese with the broad and deep knowledge and feel for other nations of the older generations. Interestingly, polling data reveals that a growing proportion of new hires would rather not work overseas.

In the "old days," the majority of these cosmopolitan Japanese were men. Today, most internationalized Japanese are women. This is a welcome development, but also a troubling one. It reflects the feeling of many of Japan's ambitious women that they will have a better future abroad, or at home in foreign-owned institutions or embassies, than in a Japanese environment.

Consequently, fewer Japanese are capable of international communications. Those who are capable often are marginalized from

the core of Japanese society (like the women who thrive in foreign companies or outside of the archipelago). It is not primarily about language. It's about the ability to interact with "the others," expressing oneself in a manner that makes a good impression on them, or as Americans say the skill to win friends and influence people. Some of these older Japanese can "work a crowd" of foreigners, get noticed, and convince them. This is less common among younger members of the Japanese establishment.

Japan suffers from what we could call a loss of voice. Whenever one attends a conference or seminar in Tokyo that brings together Japanese and foreigners, many of the Japanese participants are affiliated with foreign-owned organizations.

Their accomplishments are impressive, but they operate at the periphery of the real Japanese power structure. The others, those who truly belong to the Japanese "ruling class," are familiar faces since they are so rare. And even then, many are frequently on the periphery of the true "core" of the establishment.

There are no simple remedies to allow Japan to regain its voice. The ascendancy of the "domestic" element over the "internationalized" one in Japan is the product of incentives rooted in the educational and employment systems. But unless Japan wants to find itself even more isolated, this is an issue that needs to be addressed.

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