

The relationship between Denmark and Japan

Introduction

Denmark and Japan. These two countries situated in each end of the world may seem very remote, but actually they have more in common than one would think at first glance.

The two have a long history of friendly relations and trade, and in the recent years modern transportation and communications technology has brought the two countries even closer. Globalization and the coming of the Internet age have made a variety of different cultural products available. Even if they don't have the means to actually travel to the other country, information gathering and cultural exchange has become easily accessible for citizens of both Japan and Denmark.

However the relationship could still be improved. There are still many stereotypes in the public discourse of both countries that would improve both the friendship and business between Denmark and Japan. Also Denmark and Japan could mutually benefit from working together on solving similar problems of modern society, such as global warming and ageing society. In this essay I will elaborate my thoughts on how to improve and strengthen the relationship between Denmark and Japan.

Room for improvement: fighting misconceptions and stereotypes

One of the problems Denmark and Japan face, in spite of the rising availability of information, is the many cultural misconceptions still present in the two countries. The reasons behind this might be language barriers and cultural differences, that make it hard to evaluate whether information is reliable or not.

In Japan many people does not seem to know too much about Danish culture. While I was living in Japan there was a surprisingly large amount of TV shows mentioning Denmark. Mostly the high tax rates were brought up in the context of the debate on whether to raise the Japanese consumption tax. But in a lot of instances there was no mentioning of what all the Danish taxes was used for. This makes the high taxes seem very extreme, and Denmark seem like a terrible country burdening its citizens with heavy taxation and not offering much in return. Other programs focussed on how Scandinavian welfare offered free education, hospitals and pensions but did not mention the high taxes, making Denmark seem like a fairy tale country overflowing with milk and honey. It was a very interesting division, and I really hope the viewers saw both types of programs, and were able to add the information together.

The image of Japan as the land of Geisha and Samurai is slowly fading in Denmark, and is being replaced by an image of a highly developed but inflexible society, where people are always wearing suits and work all the time. Another widely spread idea is that Japan, including the culture and people are close to impossible to understand. For example I once, to my horror, overheard a first year Japanese student say that Japanese people don't feel in the same way as "western" people, and therefore "we" can't understand "them." This is of course an extreme example, but misconceptions like these may become barriers in strengthening the relationship of the two countries. One consequence of the misconceptions can be seen in the business world where some Danish companies hesitate to enter the Japanese market, because the burden of overcoming the language difficulties and differences in business culture is often judged to be too big.

Japan in the shadow of China?

During the recent years the phrase "Rising China" has become a buzzword in most of the world, and in Denmark too companies and government departments have turned their attention to China. In the business world it is often said that China is a cheaper and easier

market to enter than the Japanese, and more and more companies are choosing to place their Asian headquarters in the former. There has been an impact on education too, Chinese studies at Copenhagen University has doubled its number of students accepted into first year. As a Japanese student I have had to defend why I didn't study Chinese, and many of my friends have joked about how I have made the wrong choice. In spite of this I do not see things so black and white.

I'm happy that China is doing well, as this will also intensify the focus on the entire region. What's more Japan continues to be a huge market and an international player, independently of how its neighbouring countries are doing. However the Japanese state and companies wishing to trade with foreign countries, should also investigate whether it is possible to do more to help counter the image of an impenetrable Japanese market.

Additionally one could say that Japan is present in Danish everyday life in a more active way than China is. Lately there is a boom of modern Japanese culture in Denmark, from manga, anime and *cosplay*, to underground fashion such as *gyaru* or Lolita. The people involved with the culture are very aware that it is from Japan, and many of them begin studying other aspects of Japanese society as well. Especially the younger generations are active, holding conventions (e.g. J-popcon and Genki Con), writing online magazines and blogs on Japanese fashion (such as Starlight Magazine), and attending Japanese culture and language courses at public municipal Youth Schools.¹ This generation will grow up with Japanese culture as a natural part of their surroundings, and the spread of "Japanese Cool" will most likely become a step towards overcoming stereotypes about Japan.

Countermeasures: bridge builders in the business world

Despite difficulties mentioned above, Japan is still the world's second largest economy, and a very attractive market for Danish companies.

Recently some companies working with Japan have begun to hire counsellors or even employees to help overcome the cultural differences. Some experts are hired to solve specific problems, and others are hired to give seminars on Japanese business culture and etiquette in general. The companies are acknowledging that even if you have a translator or an interpreter, the differences in business culture can be an obstacle.

When globalization started at the end of the 20th century, many feared that it would bring global culture conformity, where "western" culture and customs would erase local cultures and diminish regional differences. Luckily this has not been the case, but the growth of cross-regional trade has made cultural bridge builders more important than ever. This is an important role in society that students of foreign culture and language must help fill.

Knowledge exchange for students

During my trip in Japan, one thing that had a deep impact on me in terms of Denmark-Japan relations was meeting a student of economy. He is studying the Scandinavian welfare model and specializing in Danish society. The conversation went on and on, as we had so much to learn from each other. It was a wonder how much potential knowledge could be hidden in the informal conversation between fellow students.

One way to facilitate knowledge exchange like this could be creating networks connecting people in Denmark studying Japan or Japanese with their Japanese counterparts. Another option could be a website connecting people based on their area of study, in a way like the

¹ Ungdomsskoler. A public program for youth between 13 and 18 years old, offering courses in instruments, art, theater, languages etc.

language-exchange site www.lang-8.com. The problem is that networks or websites like these take a lot of time and work to maintain, not to mention other resources.

In Denmark less organized initiatives has also been made to bring students together, such as the “Talk Night” events started by Asian Study Programme students from the Copenhagen Business School, and later co-hosted with students from the Asia Department of Copenhagen University. Though mainly focussed on language exchange, the events brought Japanese and Chinese foreign exchange students, and students from the two universities together and created a network of knowledge. Unfortunately the events stopped due to lack of proper locations, and worst of all the lack of volunteer organizers.

Public Diplomacy and cultural exchange

Both the Danish and Japanese governments are doing a lot to spread awareness of their countries culture through public diplomacy. But since they usually are catering to the publics interest they sometimes play it too safe, and only promote things that are already well known. For example Denmark has a tendency to go with Royal Copenhagen, H. C. Andersen and furniture design from the 50’ies and 60’ies.

A new idea for public diplomacy could be music exchange or exchange agreements between TV stations. An idea for music exchange could be pairing two similar music group from each country and send them on a tour of the two countries together. Some Danish bands like Mew are already popular in Japan, though many of the fans do not know that they are Danish. Two TV stations could exchange programs depicting life in the two countries, TV dramas or documentaries for example, an effective (and entertaining!) way to reach a wide audience. It would also be relatively cheap if the stations could agree to a free exchange of material. Denmark did exchanges like this with the Baltic countries after they regained independence in the 90’ies, and it was fairly effective.

Movies, documentaries and TV series are desirable because they have larger potential to reach a broader audience and give a more realistic or holistic picture of the culture or society than underground fashion, anime, fairytales or furniture design does. The bigger insight the Danish public has in everyday Japanese life, the harder it will be to maintain stereotypes, and therefore trade and cooperation becomes easier. The same thing is of cause also true the other way around.

In Japan there are unused resources for public diplomacy in the many companies endeavouring to create greener products. This is because many Japanese companies tend to design and market their products to seem *mukokuteki* or stateless. For example Toyota, one of the leading makers of environmentally friendly cars, is very hesitant to refer to Japanese values in their commercials in Denmark, and when they do it’s highly ironical and with a very stereotypical portrayal of Japanese culture.

Social network sites and the Internet: new forms of public diplomacy and private cultural exchange

The rapid spread of the computers and access to the Internet is giving countries new tools for more direct public diplomacy. Embassies can have direct mailing lists or Facebook pages advertising events and spreading culture to a specific audience.

Last year the Royal Danish Embassy in Japan started a twitter account where it shares news, information and advertises events. A lot of the information shared is created by and concerning people, companies or organizations independent from the Danish Embassy. This is a win situation for everybody participating: event organizers can get advertised trough an

official channel, the followers has a reliable source of events or information concerning Denmark, and the Danish Embassy has a base of followers to reach out to.

In addition the Internet have broadened the possibilities for private citizens to participate in the exchange of knowledge. On social network sites such as Twitter, Facebook and Mixi communities are forming, and people as well as organizations are sharing information.

Besides these general social network sites, a number of special interest sites have started appearing, such as the two Japanese language sites www.copenlife.org and www.hyggelig-news.com. These sites aim to bring news from Denmark, or all of Scandinavia, to a Japanese speaking audience.

An example of a Danish initiative is the brand new www.konbini.dk - a site sharing a wide variety of mainstream and underground news from Japan, as well as a weekly update with Japanese music.

In common for all these sites is that they are mainly driven by private Japanese citizens with an interest in Denmark, or vice versa. For example *copenlife* has a number of blogs on the site where Japanese living in Denmark can write about their experiences. This makes the site more vital and ensures new updates almost everyday. Though this very personal, “bottom-up” approach is probably the reason why sites like this are popular, embassies, maybe in cooperation with relevant schools or other institutions, could help by sharing these sites to a broader audience.

Underdeveloped potential for collaboration

Denmark and Japan are in many respects two very different countries with two distinct cultures. But on the other hand it is widely recognized that the two have a lot in common.

The common sense of design, architecture and fashion that Japan and Denmark share, is recognized both by professionals and the general public. But there are also commonalities that aren't as widely known, even though these commonalities could be basis for a closer cooperation between the two countries.

One problem both countries face, and where further cooperation and knowledge exchange would be mutually beneficial, is the difficulties arising from turning into an ageing society. Some would say the differences in the way Japan and Denmark take care of their elders are too big, and will obstruct cooperation in this field. However the fact that there are differences may be helpful in the search for new and innovative solutions. One good example of this is the recent collaboration between Danish municipalities and research companies with Japanese producers to test Japanese assistant robot technology in Danish style welfare elderly homes. Until recently no one in Denmark could imagine having robots in the care sector, but in Japan some of these technologies are already alleviating the work burden of care workers.

Japan and Denmark are also both working hard to become energy efficient societies in order to counter the negative effects of global warming. Both countries have bold visions of a achieving a future independent from fossil fuels, without lowering our current quality of life. There are huge potential for collaboration and knowledge exchange between green projects in the two countries. One recent example is the study tour by former prime minister Kan Naoto and a delegation from “Future City”-initiative city Higashi Matsushima to the energy self-sufficient island of Samsø. The fact that Japan is not only rebuilding after the horrible disaster of March 11 2011, but is actually using the devastation to create an energy friendly city made headlines in Denmark. In the future we should strive to strengthen collaboration in areas like these.

Conclusion

I have tried to come up with different ideas and thoughts on how to improve the relationship between Denmark and Japan based on my own experiences as a Dane studying Japanese society. Some of these are very simple and others concern bigger problems that might prove hard to solve, such as overcoming stereotypes or cultural differences. My general opinion is that heightening the awareness of the normal lifestyle of the general public, not promotion of high or special culture, is the best way to counter the general misconceptions that hinder further strengthening of the relationship.

The Internet is becoming a forum for private persons and students to exchange knowledge and learn about culture, but it's hard for sites to reach a broader audience, and this is why public diplomacy is still a necessary tool in raising public awareness.

Furthermore I believe Denmark and Japan could, and should work together, both on national level and in the private sector, to solve shared problems such as the challenges of ageing society and global warming.

The relationship between Denmark and Japan is already good and has been for decades. This is a fact. But when we think about this relationship we ought to look to the future, not only the past. We should ask ourselves: "what can we achieve together?" and think of ways in which the good relationship between two countries could be strengthened. It should be our ambition to work together to solve problems that do not concern Denmark and Japan alone, but also the broader international community.

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