

People to People Interchange Report 2 – Essay on improving Japan-Denmark relations

by Lars Strøbæk, April 2012

The recent People to People Interchange study trip to Japan arranged by the Embassy of Japan in Denmark and Kuniburi International was my first visit to Japan. Since this is the case, it provided me with a lot of food for thought on the relationship between Japan and my own home country.

The first thing that surprised me was how many Japanese people seemed to be aware of and have a positive attitude towards Denmark as a concept. Growing up in Copenhagen, but being very interested in foreign countries (especially in the anglo-american cultural sphere), Denmark has always seemed to me to be a very insignificant entity on the international scene. This is mainly to do with the nature of Europe in a global context. Europe is made up of a number of countries, some big, and some small. The big countries are ones that most people of the world are familiar with and have some sort of relation to – these primarily consist of the UK, Germany, France, Italy and Spain. Especially the UK and Spain have a huge presence on the global cultural scene through their cultural legacy of language, since the USA, Australia, Canada, South Africa, etc. all speak English, and most of South America speak Spanish (and Portuguese, but in my view this is subsumed into a greater latin culture). In comparison, the smaller European countries don't seem to have much international impact. Some countries have had an extremely important role in global history, such as the Netherlands, but their cultural impact is nonetheless quite small, at least from a Danish perspective, where the vast majority of cultural products consumed come from the UK and the USA. We don't hear much about the Netherlands, Portugal, or Romania in our day-to-day environment and media, and therefore we don't know much about these countries. I therefore always assume that the rest of Europe, and by extension the rest of the world, know much about Denmark either.

However, in meeting people during the visit to Tokyo, I generally got the impression that Denmark and Scandinavia were places that they were familiar with and interested in. Partly this must be due to specifically meeting a lot of people with an interest in Denmark, such as at the Japan-Denmark

Association meeting, and people just being nice and polite, but there were also signs that you could not argue with, such as a food counter called “Danish Bar” at one of the subway stations. This experience gave me a feeling that the admiration that I and many of my fellow Danes feel towards Japan clearly is not one-sided, but that many Japanese people feel an admiration towards Denmark as well, which is very inspirational when it comes to fostering increased co-operation between the two countries in the future.

Looking at the similarities and differences between Danish and Japanese culture and daily life, I feel that these can be divided into three different types.

One type might be called “admirable traits”. These include cultural aspects that inspire a sense of wonder and admiration in the other country. For Japan, the primary admirable aspects seen from a Danish point of view include: Anime and manga, gardening, calligraphy, cuisine. Currently, most teenagers who choose to study Japanese language do so because they love manga. Among adults, sushi and tempura are extremely popular with people who like cooking exotic foods. And the idyllic images of Japanese gardens, temples and countryside, as seen in many tourist brochures, have an exquisite beauty that will continue to attract visitors to come to Japan as tourists. These are all examples of differences between Japan and Denmark that make Danes very attracted to Japan.

The second type of traits might be called “common traits”, as these are the things that are not different between the two countries, but are similar. Common traits between Japan and Denmark include, for example, an emotional tendency towards being quiet and reserved instead of excited and impulsive, and an artistic appreciation of minimalism and simplicity. These are traits that make Danes in Japan and Japanese in Denmark feel at home and appreciated, and create a feeling of familiarity.

The last type of traits might best be described as “alien traits”, being things that are very different between the two countries and which are usually seen in a negative light. From a Danish point of view, examples of this would be Japanese working conditions of salarymen working very late hours and never seeing their families, the tradition of wearing face masks in the street and when riding the subway, and a seeming fascination with sexualising very young teenage girls in school uniforms. From

a Japanese point of view, examples might be hygiene issues and various social conventions, but it is difficult for me to be specific about this since I come from a Danish perspective. Such types of cultural differences can make people feel like the other country is weird, bizarre, and that they will never understand them.

To strengthen the emotional ties between Denmark and Japan, and through these the political and economic ties, public diplomacy efforts are in my opinion well advised to take these three types of differences and similarities between the two countries into consideration.

The most basic way of creating and nurturing positive feelings and public diplomacy between two countries is to create positive associations through cultural promotion. When doing so, it is natural to use the admirable traits of a country as promotion, to capture the attention and admiration of the target audience. What traits are used will depend on the more specific target group – since manga and anime are popular among young people, promotions that are aimed at a young audience will use these cultural elements to the greatest effect. For an older audience, traditional arts like calligraphy and flower arrangement are more suitable.

Once positive associations have been established through these admirable traits, the other two types of traits become relevant. When people learn more about the ordinary lives of Japanese or Danish people, the subtle and basic similarities become clearer, and the feeling of closeness and similarity increases, which creates a further bond of sympathy. At the same time, alien traits that may seem weird and unusual become more relatable, and ideally, people should start understanding that they themselves are also weird in many ways, and that there is really no such thing as “ordinary” – everything depends on perspective, and we grow emotionally by trying to see the world from different perspectives and overcoming our own cultural bias.

Mutual recognition is another aspect that I think is important to emphasise to strengthen the relationship between peoples of different countries. It creates respect and attachment when Japanese people feel that Danish people are aware of and sympathise with what it is like to be Japanese, such as we saw very strongly in the aftermath of the great earthquake and tsunami of 2011. Similarly, it creates

respect and attachment when Japanese people display interest and enthusiasm for aspects of Danish life, such as a popular video clip of a Japanese pop group singing a Danish soccer team anthem of the 1980's. Danish cosplay conventions are a similar expression of appreciation for a non-local cultural phenomenon. Encouraging and engaging with these practices is a great way of encouraging the initial stage of interest in cultural cooperation and friendship in my view.

However, such initiatives should not stop at the superficial level of simply watching foreign films or workshops on traditional art. I strongly feel that once an initial interest has been created, this should be encouraged by more in-depth activities that will lead to both engagement with the common traits and understanding of the alien traits of the respective countries.

Examples of such activities from a Danish perspective might be lectures on contemporary Japanese life, about challenges faced by both countries such as an increasing number of senior citizens, and most significantly, help with language learning and text appreciation. The greatest barrier between two countries is nearly always the language, and knowing a little bit about the foundations of how a people communicates is in my view one of the best ways of creating a rapport and connection with that people. For this reason, I feel that very basic language classes are one of the most powerful tools available when it comes to creating and stimulating interest and friendship between countries.

Presuming that a basic level of positive interest exists, the best way of creating bonds of friendship between foreign nationals is for them to visit each other, and my impression is that the links of tourism and trade between Japan and Denmark are strong and healthy. During my visit to Japan as a guest of the People to People Interchange Program, I felt on my own body the positive feeling it engendered to experience face-to-face all the admirable, common and alien traits of Japan as compared to my native Denmark. The experience has strengthened my desire to help others understand Japan's unique culture and mentality, both through language learning and experiencing it with your own eyes.