Vikings and Samurai

Cultural and Economic Similarities Between the Japanese and the Swedes

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The Japanese and the Swedes are more similar than most people would believe. There are indeed several underlying social and cultural factors, which are shared by both Japan and Sweden. This paper describes and analyses the most striking similarities, in order to create a framework that can assist in forecasting the future of Japan's economy and social conditions.

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VIKINGS AND SAMURAI
CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC SIMILARITIES BETWEEN THE JAPANESE AND THE SWEDES

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One century ago, there was a small country which was poor and agricultural. Since then, however, it has rapidly built up an industrial basis, and eventually managed to achieve one of the fastest growth rates in the world, thus gaining a place among the most extensively industrialized countries.

Many of this country's companies have now grown into world leaders in their respective fields, mainly because of an aggressive and highly effective export drive.

This remarkable economic prowess is generally attributed to such factors as rapid adoption of advanced technology in production, long-term corporate economic planning, consensus decision-making, harmonious relations between labour and management, and close cooperation between the big corporations and the government, which during most of the post-war era was ruled by the same political party.

Another important factor in this rapid economic growth was the existence of an educated and highly dedicated work force, characterized by such social values as putting community before the individual and a widespread respect for authority.

Which is this country? Is it today's Japan, maybe, or is it Sweden of the late 1980's? In fact, this description applies to either of these countries and times. The reasons for this are several underlying social and cultural factors, shared by both Japan and Sweden. This paper aims to detail and analyze certain of the most striking similarities, in order to create a framework that can assist in forecasting the future of Japan's economy and social conditions.

There are numerous books and treatises, both academic and popular, about the cultural differences between Japan and the Western nations. It is undoubtedly true that there are many such differences. However, I will instead deal with the many cultural similarities that in fact do exist between Japan and Sweden. There are of course also some differences regarding culture, but in this paper I argue that the similarities are actually going deeper in the national culture of the two nations, than the differences do, as the latter often exist purely on the surface.

There have unfortunately been few attempts to explain the culture of Scandinavia. In Japan, where such attempts are abundant, there is a widespread belief that the cultural values still dominant in Japanese society today have been derived from the old binding traditions and rules of communal village society. Despite the much smaller population in Sweden and the rest of Scandinavia, I would argue that the cultural values there too reflect on the traditions and rules of pre-industrial rural life.
The most striking similarity between the two nations is the group mentality. This is not always understood, however, as one very remarkable fact about the typical Swedish mentality is that, while almost every Swede likes to style himself as a great individualist, his attitudes and behaviour much more stresses group cohesion than individuality. Here there is clearly much in common between Japanese and Swedish attitudes. Professor Åke Daun of the University of Stockholm, in his book 'The Swedish Mentality', points out several factors paralleled in Swedish and Japanese societies.

Among these factors are such 'typically Japanese' traits as politeness, passivity, obedience to authority, conformity, fear of embarrassment by losing face, shyness and social reserve, a need for harmony and the avoidance of conflict, the restrained display of emotions, an emphasis on rationality, and a high degree of egalitarianism. These traits can just as well be called 'typically Swedish'. The fact that the average Swede does not recognize this as a group mentality seems to be the much smaller size of pre-industrial settlements in Sweden. These settlements were also much more distant from each other, than was ever the case in Japan. The Swede, although motivated by the same factors as were prevalent in Japan, simply had to be more self-reliant, as his country was harsher.

When it comes to politeness, for instance, the typical Swedish attitude is similar to the Japanese, although it actually works in a different way from politeness in Japanese society. Politeness is not so often verbal, as a part of the body language. This has, for instance, produced a remarkable coincidence, when it comes to bowing.

Contrary to popular belief in Japan, young Swedish boys (not girls) are taught to bow to their elders, and it is still considered polite to bow when for instance shaking hands. In present times, this custom is slowly fading away, but it is still quite strong. This is even emphasized in the military service, compulsory to all young Swedish men. The Swedish military services may be unique in the Western world in this aspect, as the instruction actually prescribes a bow to senior officers in all situations where the serviceman does not wear headgear. When wearing headgear, such as a hat or a helmet, but only when wearing headgear, a military salute is prescribed instead of a bow. Without headgear, a bow is always prescribed.

There are actually two Swedish words for the verb 'bow'. The first one, bocka, is mainly reserved for the deep bow of young boys and very junior employees. The second word, buga, is considered more dignified and signifies a much more stately bow, not so deep.

It is interesting to note that when referring to Japanese, almost all Swedes use the verb buga, i.e. the more dignified variety. The probable reason for this is that Swedes generally never come in contact with Japanese children, although they might meet Japanese adults, either as visitors to Japan or when the latter are visiting Sweden.

Another non-verbal way of politeness is the fact that Swedes generally remove their shoes when they enter somebody's home. This has triggered the response of urging the guest to keep his shoes on, so that he does not need to inconvenience himself by removing them. Despite this, the guest will almost always remove his or her shoes.

In Sweden, the character trait passivity is strongly connected to the trait obedience to authority. Swedes are generally very law-abiding, despite the fact that they often verbally express their contempt of authority and regulations. Once again, the average Swede likes to style himself a great individualist, despite the fact that he most often will conform and follow what is decreed from above. Thus, conformity is also a part of this character trait.

The fear of embarrassment by losing face is also wide-spread in Sweden. This is somewhat reflected by the legal system, which is fairly lenient. Most Swedes dislike going to court. Instead, conflicts are generally solved by negotiation or arbitration. The Japanese system is much similar in this respect. The rationale is to avoid going to court, rather than winning the judicial decision in court. The rate of lawyers to the population is not as high, neither in Japan nor Sweden, as in many other Western countries.
Shyness and social reserve are two traits very easy to notice in Sweden, as well as in Japan. It is, for instance, common for both Swedish and Japanese to be initially shy and reticent when meeting new acquaintances. Of course, different individuals behave in different ways, and this applies equally to both races. Neither the Swedes nor the Japanese can generally be said to be extrovert people. In both countries, it takes time to develop friendship, and fully developed friendship is usually stronger than in many other, more outgoing nations.

It is interesting to note that this mentality also shows itself in other, less obvious situations. The Swedes, and the Japanese, are usually dependent on alcoholic beverages to break down the social barriers that their reserve erects around them. This, by the way, is equally true for men as for women. There are few other countries, except Japan and the Scandinavian nations, where it is common for workers of both sexes to go to bars together after work.

The need for harmony and avoidance of conflict is practiced in Sweden through a system which is similar to the Japanese *ringi* process, i.e. the circulation of a proposal within the ranks of a corporation. In Sweden, a similar system of circulating proposals is used by both private companies and government organizations. This system is even practiced on the national level, as every major change in law or policy is preceded by the active seeking of comments and opinions from interested parties, mainly government organizations, major corporations, and the trade unions. All these comments and opinions are contemplated by a special commission set up to deal with the question, and the commission's eventual recommendation is usually a consensus decision, supported by all the participants. This system is called remiss-system.

Another cultural trait in common is the restrained display of emotions. Once again, the people of both countries might have to resort to alcohol to be able to show their emotions openly.

The emphasis on rationality works in several ways. Its main effect is that problems generally are confronted in a rational way, once again without any unnecessary display of emotions. This, by the way, also benefits financial planning in both Japanese and Swedish business concerns. The emphasis on rationality assures that both Swedish and Japanese corporations spend efforts on long-term strategy, especially in the export business, instead of concentrating on producing short-term profits which might actually harm the long-term development. This policy is accepted by Swedish and Japanese shareholders as being more advantageous in the long run. In Japan, there have been controversies between American shareholders in Japanese companies, who demand mere short-term gains, and the Japanese management. At a Swedish shareholders' meeting, such a demand would be unthinkable.

Another very strong trait in the Swedish population since ancient times is egalitarianism. This trait is also certainly very evident in post-war Japan, where class consciousness has virtually disappeared. Today approximately 95% of the Japanese consider themselves middle class. In Sweden, there is very little emphasis on class at all, with both senior managers and workers maintaining a very similar life-style. This has been reinforced by the Swedish taxation system, which until now served to reduce every Swede's income to more or less the same level, regardless of his or her actual income.

It is interesting to note that this tradition of egalitarianism is the real reason why the Swedish Social Democratic Party managed to retain their grip on public power for so long. Their outspoken ideology in this field is very well matching public beliefs. Virtually no Swede, regardless of his or her political beliefs and regardless of how much he criticizes the taxation system, would argue with the basic idea of egalitarianism.

Egalitarianism per se, however, has never been a threat to the concentration of business ownership. In a similar way as in Japan, the structure of ownership in industry is that a number of family dynasties indirectly control Swedish industry. These families, the most prominent one being the Wallenberg family, manage this with the aid of a number of government-controlled national pension funds. Such institutional investors own approximately 80% of the total Swedish share capital. Thus, as the government and the
major business concerns have close ties, they have a mutual interest in supporting each other. The strong business concerns assist the government in such ways as keeping down the unemployment factor, while the government invests in and actively promotes the business concerns.

Although I already have mentioned some instances of how certain cultural traits affect economic factors, I have so far limited myself to the general cultural similarities. There are, however, also several purely economic similarities, immediately recognizable to students of economic development. One of the most important similarities in this field is the attitude to work, in its fundamental aspects virtually identical in the two cultures.

Both Sweden and Japan were backward and undeveloped countries in the mid-19th century. At that time, however, a rapid pace of modernization transformed both countries from agricultural to industrial societies.

The main belief of workers used to be that that which is good for the company is also good for the workers. In Sweden, such worker identification was, and still is, strongest within the traditional Swedish industrial communities, the bruk communities, some of them dating back to the 17th century. These communities were built around one industrial company, often originally a government-controlled one. The spirit of these one-company-towns was always very paternalistic, the company employing family members during the span of several generations. In addition to this, the company provided education and generally took care of the employees, in the same way as Japanese major companies have been doing since the beginning of this century. This of course results in extremely high worker loyalty.

This attitude to work was also encouraged by the fact that both countries were prone to natural disasters. In Japan, earthquakes, typhoons, and tidal waves (tsunami) always threatened the population, while in Sweden the cold climate often resulted in bad harvests and famine.

In recent years, however, there seems to be a much more relaxed attitude to work and an almost hedonistic lifestyle is developing in both countries. This process, mainly caused by the improved living standards which make the employees less interested in their work, has proceeded slightly faster in Sweden than in Japan, although the two nations are undoubtedly going in the same direction. The growth rate of the Swedish economy, until 1965 together with Japan the highest in the world, is now slowing down. The reason is that Sweden, evolving more rapidly, already has been forced to confront many of the demographical problems which are now beginning to close in on Japan. The Japanese improved standard of living, and the ageing of its population, will undoubtedly create a similar economic decline here, as is already being experienced in Sweden.

What is it then that makes Scandinavians, and especially Swedes, so different from other Westerners? To explain this, I will point out the factors that form the clue to the cultural similarity to Japan.

The Scandinavians, or the Nordics as they frequently call themselves, are undoubtedly part of the Western world. There are however several factors that mark them as different from other Europeans.

Homogeneity of population. With the exception of the Lapps, a formerly nomadic people in the extreme north of the Scandinavian peninsula, and the Finns, the majority group in Finland, the inhabitants of Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and Iceland, as well as the largest minority group in Finland (300,000 people, or 6% of the population), is of the same racial stock, the Nordic race.

This homogeneous group, characterized by formerly identical and still mutually comprehensible languages, similar or identical culture and traditions, and similar religious beliefs or lack thereof, has been residing in these countries since times immemorial. No archaeological finds are old enough to suggest a major wave of immigration, and the earliest literary reference (Tacitus) dates back to the 1st century. Only in recent times, after the Second World War, has immigration been a major factor in the cultural identity of the Nordic race.
Geographical location. The Nordics inhabit what for millennia was regarded as the northernmost part of Europe, and in consequence the entire Western world. This meant among other things that the climate was always harsher than in the rest of Europe. This affected agriculture in a detrimental way well into the 20th century. This fact encouraged emigration, and, as was noted above, discouraged immigration until recent times.

With the exception of Denmark, the Nordic countries are physically excluded from the rest of Europe by seas. Although Scandinavia is technically a peninsula rather than an island, this geographical fact produced the same 'island mentality' as can for instance be found in Britain (which by the way is to a large extent populated by people of Nordic stock). As in every island nation, the population is proud of its national identity and culture, and fears losing it if too much integrated in the rest of the world. This, for instance, explained the Swedish hesitation to join the EC.

Religious beliefs. Pre-Christian Scandinavia was characterized by a polytheistic religion in many aspects quite dissimilar from the other European, pre-Christian religions. Furthermore, Scandinavia was the last bastion in Europe of pre-Christian belief. Sweden, the most conservative of the Nordic countries, was not officially Christianized until in the 12th century, a time when the rest of Europe had been moulded in the Christian mind-frame for almost a millennium.

Even after this time, Catholic Christianity was never strong in Scandinavia. With the reformation in the 16th century, the Nordic countries broke loose from the bonds of Europe-centred Christianity.

Today, it is significant that only a minor part of the populace are believers, and then almost invariably in one of the free churches. The majority is religiously indifferent. But the reverse is true of the pre-Christian traditional festivals, such as jul (mid-winter), mid-summer, and a few other festivals, still enthusiastically celebrated by almost all Scandinavians. The outer, Christian form of some of these festivals, imposed by missionaries, have now almost totally disappeared, but the old pre-Christian core is still remembered.

As might be expected due to the geographical separation of the two nations, Sweden and Japan, there are few religious beliefs in common. It is however interesting to note that the most notable similarity is the general lack of religiosity in the population. The only religiously active are the so called free churches in Sweden and certain similarly recent religious groups in Japan, such as the Soka Gakkai. The majority of the population in both countries is more interested in honouring ancient religious festivals, mainly pre-Christian ones in Sweden, from a more casual and non-religious point of view. It is also interesting to note, that the commercial aspects of Christianity, such as Christmas shopping and Christian weddings, are popular in both countries. Other popular festivals, in both countries, go back to indigenous beliefs.

Having now analyzed the numerous similarities between these two nations, geographically so far away from each other, what can we learn from this?

As the many cultural similarities until now has led the two nations to follow a similar road to economic development, it is reasonable to assume that the future developments of both nations will also have many things in common. Today Sweden has progressed slightly faster along this road, and consequently has been forced to confront problems so far not regarded as significant in Japan. These problems, especially the demographic problems, have severely affected the politics and economics of Sweden. It is only a matter of time until the Japanese economy will encounter the same problems that are now disrupting the Swedish economy. For instance, a decreased rate of economic growth and a high unemployment rate are likely prospects for the future, unless precautions are adopted today.

To implement such precautions as long as the economy is going well is unfortunately always unpopular, and sometimes ineffective. It is therefore worthwhile to compare the two countries and their economies, in order to minimize the errors in economic policy and planning.
This is not only apparent at the government level. Even such a relatively small thing as the price of land follows the same pattern in the two countries. The price of land stabilized in Sweden in the late 1980's, at approximately the same time as the same tendency was observed in Japan. However, the Japanese property market did not heed the signs and prices were allowed to soar to ever higher levels. Today the Japanese property market has crashed. For instance, commercial land values in Osaka have fallen by 50%, from about JYE 80m per tsubo to JYE 40m (source: The Economist, 21st December 1991).

The situation is similar with newly constructed flats. In Sweden, the construction companies have virtually ceased to engage in new projects. In Japan, there are 15,000 unsold flats in the greater Tokyo area, and more than 8,000 unsold flats in Osaka. Today desperate apartment builders in these areas even offer to buy the prospective buyer's existing apartment, in order to sell one of their newly built ones.

During the depression of the 1930's, Sweden was held up as a model of a developed country and efficient economic planning. Today, Japan occupies the same position. Who will occupy this position tomorrow? I believe that Japan of today would benefit greatly by studying the development of Sweden, and especially the mistakes committed in that country in economic development and policy, to avoid having to make the same mistakes while confronting the same demographic problems. Sweden, on her part, can benefit by studying the Japanese solutions to her own current financial trouble. In this way, the two nations can help each other in their continuing economic evolution.