

A Trip to Japan

Yves Carmo

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About the author:

Yves Carmona, a former ENA student and diplomat, dedicated the majority of his career to Asia. Serving as a foreign affairs advisor in Japan twice, initially as an advisor in Singapore, and later as an ambassador to Laos and Nepal (2012-2018), he focused on the dynamic changes in Asian countries and their connections with France and Europe. Whether in his roles in Paris or abroad, his attention was consistently directed towards the evolving landscape of Asian nations. Now in retirement, he is devoted to sharing his valuable experience, particularly with students and companies, offering his insights for their benefit.

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There are many personal reasons to visit Japan, where the author of these lines first went in 1988. 8 years in the country, one trip a year at least except during the pandemic means that you might have the impression that you know it well, but no, **everyone has their own Japan**, and the archipelago changes more than we often think.

There are good habits and not-so-good **habits**. Every year, we get together the former members of the press department of the French embassy, where this author worked a few years ago, and which is now run by one of his former colleagues in Vientiane, who was then the economic attaché. It's a small world, but so many glorious memories to recall!

It's also an opportunity to talk about the present, in particular the **press and information**. It's becoming rare to see newspapers: in the metro, in the street, almost everyone is glued to their smartphone; dailies are no longer easy to find, there are no more "newspaper booths". It's true that you can get your newspaper at home, as subscriptions are still common practice, but above all you get information in a different way, even if it means having to make do with the screens that give you a quick summary of the news in the metro.

The **major national dailies** such as Asahi and Yomiuri, world leaders, were both founded in the 1870s, and were already in 'crisis' by the 2000s, but they are still alive and kicking. The response to declining circulation has been to reduce overheads, including the number of correspondents and offices abroad, and to make profitable property deals, especially during the 'bubble' period.

As for content, the newspaper remains highly diversified. When they are available, the articles are numerous and often very detailed, more so than in comparable countries.

Beyond the press, the presence of **History** in current situations, particularly conflicts, is often lacking; too many people, newspapers or not, are only interested in what is happening on the day, as if the preceding years and centuries played no role. In short, the "newspaper" is interested in the facts of the day, and the next day it moves on to other subjects. This trend is certainly affecting the free press everywhere, but the archipelago's press remains impressive.

Recent news:

An important figure in Japanese history, Ikeda Daisaku, has died aged 95. In addition to his responsibilities as President of the **Soka Gakkai**, a Buddhist sect, and the creation of the current government party based on it, the Komeito, he had also launched the 'foreign' branch of the same organisation, with some success since it spread to many countries.

The daily press covered it, of course, but after a day or two it quickly moved on without analysing the role that he and his organisation played in contemporary Japan.

It is true that the fate of **Prime Minister Kishida** is of greater interest to the press, especially as his fragility is attracting attention, as is normal in a democracy.

As we were leaving the archipelago, he had decided to purge his party, the LDP (Liberal Democratic Party), of all its high-level members who were suspected of **corruption or conflicts of interest** - a vast programme. But even within this party, which has been in power since 1955 apart from brief changes, there was strong opposition to such a purge, especially as Mr Kishida, who does not belong to the majority faction presided over before his assassination by Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, has seen his popularity ratings fall steadily, and there is an unwritten rule that below 20%, new general elections must be held.

It is true that the Abe faction was paying some of its members "**kickbacks**" (a well-known word that seems to be in vogue in the Japanese press at the moment) to thank them for undeclared funding. But Mr Kishida can't replace everyone he wants... To be continued, this old soap opera about the relationship between political power and money is making headlines in many countries!

So, in such a context, should he dissolve the government and call a **new general election**? Should **the party change prime minister**?

As a frequent visitor to the Diet Library, **the gigantic National Library**, the author of these lines has often heard the radio echoes of parliamentary debate and opposition demonstrations - peaceful today - in this country where the people have the right to speak.

What hasn't changed in Japan is the sense of **security** you feel as soon as you arrive at the airport, and the kindness with which people provide information in an urban jungle that is still difficult to understand; but geopolitics is very much present, from the conflict in Gaza to the North Korean missiles, one of which crashed beyond **Okinawa**.

This southern island was the scene of fierce fighting in 1945, and a French friend living in Japan says that the Americans are still at home there, since the MPs (Military Police) walk around with M16 assault rifles slung over their shoulders to pick up soldiers on the go... Geopolitical and historical at the same time, the never-ending conflict with South Korea over "comfort women", which looks as if it will never be resolved any more than the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, although this is an increasingly bloody war.

And the economy?

Yamaha: how a company created before Meiji (1868) has constantly diversified and adapted to political circumstances to remain one of the country's main economic players, forming a conglomerate, something that conformist economists disapprove of.

But all it has done is take account of changes in business life. The company did what it knew how to do - in the beginning, pianos, so it needed craftsmen who knew how to work with wood, who were very useful in making propellers for warships. But when WWII war lost, and Japan was subject to the "recommendations" of the GHQ (US High Command) that it should not excel in this field, it turned to motorbikes: high growth provided the Japanese with the necessary purchasing power.

Today, it is one of the companies that stands out at the Tôkyô motor show, and it manufactures almost everything with an engine, including boats, from speedboats to ocean liners, and even today pianos, some of which are automatic, and runs schools where music is taught seriously.

Conversely, **Toshiba**, which made Japan proud with its good engineers, according to its shareholders, is going to have to delist because it is virtually bankrupt. Its governance is doomed. A restructuring fund run by Japanese companies should prevent its closure. Without going into detail, it seems that this company, founded in 1875, has not been able to adapt to a rapidly changing world, and in particular to the difficulties of the nuclear industry, one of its flagships.

On a daily basis, **the Japanese say they are getting poorer, even though their country is rich.** According to the Weekly Economist, "wages are stagnating because while older people and women have entered the labour market, the number of extra people available to work is running out. At first sight, the starting point for inflation is the rise in import prices due to the increase in oil prices and the weakening of the yen, but there has also been a concomitant labour shortage (...) Over the past two years, households have experienced a one-sided deterioration in the way they perceive their living conditions, and the cumulative scale of the deterioration is about the same as that of the Lehman shock in 2008. We could say that a 'Lehman shock for households' is happening. That just goes to show how hard current price rises are hitting households."

As elsewhere, inflation is hitting the least well-off households hardest.

Yet the **scandals** continue: corruption, tax evasion, which the Olympic Games have given a particular vigour in a country that has long practised them, and exchanges of services have facilitated them. The juicy story of the period is that of an agency of gigolos (in Japan, they are called "hosts", whose role is above all to cheer up women who are too busy).

The problems of **energy and global warming**, which are common to all mankind, have taken on a particular gravity in the archipelago since the Fukushima nuclear accident in March 2011, and Japan is still paying the price. Now, with the authorisation of the IAEA, it has dumped the overflowing effluent from the contaminated plant into the sea. Neighbouring countries are protesting, particularly China, which is Japan's No. 1 export market, followed by the United States, Chinese Taipei and South Korea. In retaliation, China has suspended imports of seafood products, and scallop producers, hit by poor sales, are hoping that South Korea, whose President has shown goodwill towards the archipelago, will not follow suit.

The **big neighbour** is at the centre of all conversations, a veritable obsession for journalists in particular: worrying, it is charged with all the sins, some of which go beyond it. We know how it has created landing places on what used to be submerged reefs at high tide, thus appropriating vast points of support. Does it want to strangle the archipelago in this way? We'll come back to that later.

And what about France? Apart from the tourists returning after Covid, there are a multitude of signs - the erosion of the use of French in favour not only of Mandarin and Korean, but also of English and German - that its influence is waning.

The leader of the 'French school' at the Gaimusho (Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs) is now a vice-minister, the highest rank before ambassador. Are we fully aware of the opportunity this

represents in a world where "others don't think like we do", as the man who was his French counterpart - a little older - says in his memoirs?

This openness to others, the lack of which was undoubtedly one of the reasons for Japan's adventurist follies between 1930 and 1945, could once again lead to war, and many are aware of this. Will they go so far as to oppose it? Let's see if the next general election (in January 2025 at the latest) brings to power a different Japan, one that is **more open to foreign influences** than its conservative majority.