

Japanese sense of uniqueness: barrier to business

By Sam Jameson
Los Angeles Times Service

TOKYO — Shumpei Kumon, 53, a noted Tokyo University economics professor, confessed recently that he had learned only two years ago that Japanese do not have intestines longer than those of Westerners. Kumon's lifelong belief was shattered only because of a U.S.-Japan dispute over beef import quotas, which Japan agreed in June to eliminate in three years.

An American scholar had asked him if Japanese really believed they had unusually long intestines that made it difficult for them to digest beef, an argument that Japanese politicians and agricultural leaders had used to justify the quotas.

When he replied yes, the American looked at him askance. Kumon then questioned Japanese doctors, he wrote in a Sankei newspaper column.

"They looked at me in disbelief," he related.

DOCTORS TOLD him, Kumon wrote, that government propagandists concocted the myth in World War II to forestall complaints about a lack of meat caused by wartime deprivations.

But that such an argument won unresisting acceptance, and continues to be accepted today, underscores a deeper Japanese trait that many foreigners, including businessmen and government officials, are finding increasingly irritating.

That trait is the widespread belief, often reaching the level of an article of faith, that Japanese culture, language and the Japanese people themselves are unique in more ways than all other cultures and peoples of the world.

The conviction, a growing number of foreign experts say, has caused trade conflicts, troubles foreign business people working in Japan

and, in many instances, stands as an emotional wall against personal relationships with foreigners.

Clyde V. Freestowitz Jr., a former Department of Commerce official, wrote in his book, "Trading Places: How We Allowed Japan to Take the Lead," that the Japanese possess a "near obsession with their uniqueness" that "gives rise to a certain tribal pride."

Former Ambassador to Japan Edwin O. Reischauer devotes an entire chapter of his book, "The Japanese," to what he calls "the Japanese sense of being somehow a separate people — of being unique." It is stronger than for any other people, Reischauer wrote.

Tait Kaciliffe, president of International Business Information Inc., complained that Japan's "exaggerated sense of cultural uniqueness . . . plagues companies trying to establish a business foothold in Japan." Foreign business people find they must tailor every aspect of their approach to the finest details of Japanese sensitivities.

IN A SURVEY, the Nihon Keizai newspaper recently asked foreigners living in Japan to check off "sources of difficulty in business dealings with Japanese." One of the listed items was "The uniqueness of Japan is constantly being emphasized to me."

"I speak to the Japanese on every occasion I get about the theory they have of their uniqueness," said an American diplomat involved in trade negotiations, who asked not to be identified. "They are not unique and should stop thinking they are."

Few scholars would put it that flatly. There certainly are aspects of Japan and its culture that are unique, they would say. But they usually insist that Japan is not unique in significantly more ways than any other culture.

right-brain dominance when hearing. Beehoven played on any non-Japanese, including Chinese, instrument.

Yet Tsunoda's theory has won acceptance among even leading business executives, if not among scholars.

In recent years, American negotiators have been confronted with claims that Japanese soil is unique, an argument against allowing American contractors to do construction work on such projects as a new Osaka airport.

Also, Japanese snow is supposedly unique, so Japan imposed safety standards for imported skis with no parallels anywhere in the world, although it later bowed to protests from European countries and rescinded them.

Only after years of negotiations did Japanese insist in arguing that a rubberized ball used by high school baseball teams was unique, precluding imports of baseball bats.

EARLIER THIS year, the governmental National Language Research Institute launched a three-year study on methods to teach foreigners a simplified version of the Japanese language. Kitao Nomoto, head of the institute, said that he was trying to find a way to teach busy foreign businessmen the fundamentals of the language within 150 hours.

But foreign linguists charged that the real inspiration was a conviction that Japanese is such a uniquely difficult language that foreigners cannot comprehend it.

A consistent flow of books that now number in the hundreds has become a literary genre of its own as Nihonjin-ron — theories about the Japanese people. Reischauer, some of whose own books fall into the genre, views the books as a Japanese search for identity. But

nearly all of them do so by examining what makes Japanese different from other peoples.

Yukio Matsuyama, chief editorial writer of the Asahi newspaper, said that few Japanese pay any attention to the stories about long intestines and different brain functions. All sorts of aberrations that appear in sensationalist weekly magazines and offbeat books are read mostly out of curiosity and are seldom taken seriously, he said.

JAPAN'S SENSE of separateness, Reischauer, the former ambassador wrote, is the major obstacle to its becoming an active participant in solving problems of world trade and international tensions.

The Japanese "must overcome their sense of separateness and, to put it bluntly, show a greater readiness to join the human race. They must really identify themselves with the rest of the world and feel a part of it," Reischauer wrote.

That process may now be occurring. Although Kumon's article about intestines precipitated letters to the editor from some doctors who insisted that Japanese intestines are, indeed, extra long, all of them pointed out that long intestines have nothing to do with the ability to digest meat or beef.

For all of the trouble that trade negotiators have had with intestines, snow, soil and rubberized baseballs, the restrictions that had been justified with such arguments were, in the end, lifted.

And a new promise by Prime Minister Noboru Takeshita to double foreign aid by 1982 ensures that Japan will be very much involved with the rest of the world as its largest aid donor, replacing the United States.



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