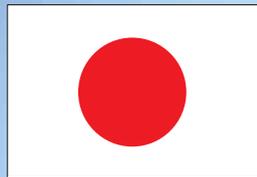


Island Country

JAPAN's

Way to Live

By Masaomi Ise



JAPAN

Japanese people often mock their own mentality as being an islander's complex or "insularism." According to the dictionary, insularism indicates a closed-minded, meticulous characteristic with a narrow outlook on things, which may have been developed by limited contacts with peoples of other countries. On the other hand, "continentalism" indicates a large-minded, generous characteristic or easy-going, carefree attitude not caring about trifles. These words cause insular Japanese people to have some inferiority complex against continental people such as American and Chinese. There are 48 island nations in the world. As a matter of fact, are these island nations really inferior to continental nations? How should Japan live as a representative of these island countries?

Island Countries Are Surprisingly Rich

Let me introduce an example of Sri Lanka and India. The national income per capita in 2001 was 460 dollars for India and 880 dollars for Sri Lanka, nearly twice as high as that of India. In addition, the literacy rate in 2000 was 57.2% for India and 91.6% for Sri Lanka. The average lifespan was 61 to 62 years in India but 70 years for the men and 76 years for the women in Sri Lanka. Although India possesses atomic weapons and a world-beating software industry, it is thus far inferior to Sri Lanka in terms of wealth, academic level and longevity.

How about Cyprus and Turkey? Cyprus had been under the domination of Ottoman Turks for more than 300 years. It then became a colony of the British Empire, and finally gained independence in 1960. Cyprus's national income per capita in 2001 was 12,320 dollars, which was at the same level as those of advanced nations. As for Turkey located across the water, the national income per capita was 2,540 dollars, about one fifth of that of Cyprus. Cyprus also outstrips Turkey in regards to the literacy rate, average length of life, and diffusion rates of automobiles and telephones.



Lastly, I would like to compare Cuba and America as an extreme case. Cuba has been battered in the communism system under Castro's administration. Assumedly Cuba can't beat America, the world's superpower. Actually,



however, Cuba is making a good showing. The average length of life of males is 73.9 years in America and 72.9 years in Cuba. The average length of life of females is 79.5 years in America and 76.9 years in Cuba. The literacy rate in Cuba is 96.7% while that in America is said to be around 80%, although there are no official statistics. The national income per capita in 2000 was 1,478 dollars for Cuba and 34,280 dollars for America, which was about 23 times that of Cuba. Looking at the poverty group in New Orleans that was devastated by a hurricane, however, it does not



seem that there is a significant difference between the lower classes of these two countries.

At any rate, quite a number of island countries in the world have thus established a richer, more stable society than continental countries across the water from them.

Contents of Insularism

What is the reason many island countries thus have a strong showing? The point of view that island countries are demonstrating their insularism or "closed-minded, meticulous characteristic with narrow views, which was developed by limited contacts with peoples of other countries" and continental countries exercise their "large-minded, generous characteristic not caring about trifles" would not be enough to explain this situation.

Katsuhiko Fuse is a non-fiction writer who worked for a general trading company for 28 years, of which he spent about 15 years in various countries in Africa, Europe, America, and Asia. From his rich experiences, Fuse explains in his book *Don't Discard Your Insularism* that one of the reasons can be found in the cooperativeness of island countries.

People living in a restricted space surrounded by ocean are inclined to feel that they cannot go anywhere else. They have to get on well with each other in their confined space. If they fail, they'll be finished. They are living with a sense of tension under such pressure. Get along with each member of the society within the confined space. Otherwise, you can be ostracized. Escape is impossible because the place is surrounded on all four sides by water. This sense of urgency is the basis of their "insularism." Their desperate feeling as if they were being cornered leads to their insularism whether good or bad. To get on well in a confined space, the logic of the society is put above that of the individual. Cooperativeness is valued highly. Consideration for the feelings of

others is also regarded as being important. These words sound like they are describing the Japanese people. I think all island nations in the world share such insularism.

For example, Sri Lanka is often called a country of smiles. Sri Lankan people are said to be tender, sensitive, gentle and straightforward. The women are modest and shy. The men run away if someone speaks to them. Sri Lankan people seem to be completely different from Indian people. In India, a lot of men gather around you anywhere and everywhere without being called. There is racial confrontation in Sri Lanka. The Sinhalese people believing in Buddhism who make up 74% of the entire population of Sri Lanka and the Tamil people believing in Hinduism who make up 18% of the population have been fighting a civil war that has

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now lasted more than 20 years. The number of war's victims has already reached 60,000. Although they have agreed to an indefinite cease-fire in 2002, their mutual hostility is still simmering. One of the reasons for the prolonged conflict is that the Tamil people have been receiving support from the head

family of Tamils, that is, about 60 million Tamil people living in Southern India. If the Sri Lankan people become free from such foreign interference, they will be able to live together in peace and harmony just like they used to in the past.

In a society within a confined space, people respect hard work and honesty in addition to cooperativeness. It is not in their nature to go to some unknown land and hit the jackpot or cheat other people to make quick money and run away to some other country. In order to live together peacefully on a small island, they have to apply themselves to their work and hang on. For example, if once you play dirty in business, bad rumors will spread rapidly all over the island and you will lose your customers. Hard work and honesty are the key elements for success in the confined space.

In island countries, people tend to form a society based on cooperativeness, hard work and honesty as described above. In such a society, people do not cheat others or fight with one another as often as in many continental countries. Accordingly, the society can easily retain and enjoy its wealth and peace. This insularism seems to be one of the reasons for the strong showing by the island countries in the world.

Island Countries' Centripetal Force and Continental Countries' Centrifugal Force

The centripetal force called cooperativeness works in island countries that have a confined space. On the other hand, the centrifugal force works in continental countries where people can move around easily. In China, a large number of people are moving from poor inland villages to rich

coastal cities. Seeking jobs, a lot of people travel down the country from the former Manchurian territories that have a sluggish economy up to the rapidly growing Guangdong area. In addition, Chinese people have emigrated to Southeast Asian countries and even to San Francisco and Vancouver, where they

have built a large society of their own. On the contrary, their mother country on the continent suffers from constant conflicts among various ethnic minorities. It must be hard to run a continental country consisting of people that have a high mobility. The bureaucrats always have to make efforts to keep the people close, strengthen their solidarity and enhance their patriotism. Different ethnic groups have different interests. Doing a favor for one ethnic group can harm the interests of the other groups. There will always be a dilemma. But if the ethnic groups are left to do what they like, it can lead to civil war and the country could eventually be torn apart.

The continental countries have to set and retain simple, clear-cut ideals that can keep the people close. When the ideal of constructing a socialist

country based on Marxism collapsed, the huge USSR fell to pieces. For China, the transition to a market economy is a big gamble. Unlike continental countries that need an ideology to hold the nation together, island countries can easily unify the people based on their natural cooperativeness. Accordingly, it is also easy for island countries to strike a balance between the individual freedom of the people and the uniformity of the community. This balance is an essential foundation for the stability and development of society.

The island country Britain and continental country France were rivals in the competition for colonization, but their approaches were in quite contrast to each other. France implemented an integration policy that introduced its centralized political system it had adopted as a continental

country and its unique culture to its colonies. France also took a more positive attitude than Britain to the racial mixture with the colonial people. In the Ivory Coast of Africa or Madras in Southern India, you can still find neat French-style streets where white people and children of mixed race are coming and going.

On the contrary, Britain did not set foot into the backland of its colonies. Instead, making the most use of the administration by local powerful figures, Britain stayed in the coastal area and focused on ensuring profits from trading. Unlike the continental country France that stuck to governing a colony as a whole, the island country Britain got hold of pivotal points and lines quickly. Britain thus expanded its colonies quickly resulting in an overwhelming victory over France in the competition for colonization. Britain achieved a victory because it positively exercised its "maritime insularism."

Britain's maritime insularism had another strong point, which was its information gathering capability. An important factor for fostering trading was to make the correct decisions on

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where and what to buy and where they should be sold. Gathering information from various places was, therefore, a key to the success in trading. Britain's information gathering capability achieved global-scale trading. For example, using a large number of slaves collected from Africa, Britain grew cotton in America. The cotton was then woven into cloth in Britain and put on the African and other markets. This system of trade was called the triangular trading system in the Atlantic. In addition, to buy tea from China, Britain sold opium grown in India to China. To India, it sold industrial products manufactured in Britain.

The European Continent that is across the channel from Britain is crammed with a lot of countries such as France, Spain, Italy, Holland, Germany and Russia. These continental countries formed and broke alliances constantly. From beyond the sea, Britain observed the movement of each country objectively, gathered information and made strategic interventions. It may be said that this superb location of Britain as an island country close to the continent cultivated its information gathering capability.

Japan's Way to Live

Among the 48 island countries in the world, there are only three countries that have a larger area than Japan. These are Indonesia, Madagascar and Papua New Guinea. Among the island countries, Japan is second only to Indonesia in population. In national income, Japan holds first place both in terms of gross amount and income per capita. Japan is also number one for people's average length of life. As a representative of island countries, Japan has to become a model prosperous country. Nevertheless, facing various problems such as low growth and population decrease, Japan has not yet been able to decide which way to go.

Now, let us think about how Japan should live in the future. One factor that determines whether Japan can prosper both physically and spiritually is whether Japan can take full advantage of the factors of insularism such as cooperativeness, hard work and honesty. First of all, the self-sufficiency rate of Japanese agriculture is only 40%. The Japanese government has attempted to impose heavy duties and postpone import liberalization to protect domestic agriculture. But this is a negative

side of its insularism. If Japan instead places its budget for compensating farmers' income toward the development of technology and information gathering capability, Japan will be able to produce high-quality agricultural products that are envied by the world. Secondly, as a result of introducing the American performance-based system, Japan now has an increasing number of people who simply aim at winning by fair means or foul. As a negative effect of this phenomenon, the number of people who suffer from emotional disorders is also increasing. It seems that Japanese people are losing their virtues that used to be highly valued by foreigners. Japan has to stop attaching too much importance to the performances of individuals and move toward a system that lays weight on team performance, in which Japan had originally been specialized as an island country. Without manufacturing cheap, low-quality products, Japan should stick to such thoughtful, high-quality, world-class products that would and could not be copied by any other country. It seems to me that, by acquiring such a manly attitude, Japan will be able to find its future course soon enough. Thirdly, there are some measures to convert the negative conditions such as a confined space into positive attributes. For example, Japanese people have always kept their environment clean, safe and secure, which was possible because of its narrowness. The Japanese peoples' experiences of living in a confined space have fostered their values on environmental issues and helped Japan to achieve satisfactory results in those issues. Japan should now lead the world with its environmental technology. In addition, I think Japan should promote the industrialization of its cultures. For instance, how about encouraging inbound trips that show the beauty of Japan as a full-scale tourist industry? It would also be good to export Japanese cultures and subcultures including animation. This way, Japan would be able to make the world feel happy and rich without competing with other countries in cost or becoming engaged in the armaments industry. ■

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