Cultural Bias in Contemporary Sources

Japanese Economic Strengths and Weaknesses

Time: 50 minutes
Audience: 10th, 11th or 12th grade
Subject: Economics, Contemporary Issues
Skill: Bias and Perspective

Materials:

- Printed excerpts from the report with each excerpts stapled/taped to a large sheet of chart paper (optional to use the chart paper). The excerpts can also be put on the board.
- Graphic Organizer for students to fill out
- EXPO markers or Sharpies for students to write on the chart paper/board (in two colors)

Objective:

- Identify cultural bias and perspectives through primary sources
- Differentiate Western bias and perspective from Japanese bias and perspective
- Demonstrate knowledge of contemporary cultural values, bias and strengths of Japanese businesses
- Demonstrate knowledge of western cultural bias

Focus Questions:

1. What Western bias is shown in the advice that is given to Japanese companies and the Japanese companies?
2. What are cultural values and bias of Japanese businesses?

Background:

In March 2015, global consulting firm McKinsey & Company published a report titled, "The Future of Japan: Reigniting Productivity and Growth. In the 128-page report, McKinsey & Company offers praise for the areas of strength in Japan's economy, area of growth and suggestions for improvement.

Instructions:

1. Have students walk around the room reading the excerpts from the report. In one color (red for example), students write down examples of Western Cultural Bias. In another color (blue for example), students write down cultural values of Japanese businesses or the government. *They are answering the focus questions.* **20 minutes**
    a. Some excerpts may be difficult to read so students can choose to write down only one answer or skip some excerpts.
2. Once students have answered the questions on the chart paper, have them walk around again this time filling out the graphic organizer. **20 minutes**
3. Discussion. Discuss the questions at the bottom of the graphic organizer. Collect these at the end of class as a formative assessment. **10 minutes**

Excerpts: There is one excerpt per page so they can be easily printed and taped to chart paper. *Pages 3-10.*

Graphic Organizer: *see page 2*

Directions: Once you have answered the focus question on the chart paper, fill in this chart using the answers that your classmates posted for the different excerpts.

Column A	*Column B*
Western Bias	Japanese Bias (label strength, weakness or cultural value)

1. Using the chart above, summarize the ideas in Column A.

2. Using the chart above, summarize the ideas in Column B.

3. How is the advice given to the Japanese businesses in this report cultural biased?

4. What problems could this advice cause? (consider US history and examples from the United States)

Japan achieved this status largely on the backs of its highly efficient manufacturing and exporting capabilities, which it built through heavy capital investments and an emphasis on technology and process innovation. In auto manufacturing, for example, Japanese companies (led by Toyota) imported US and European mass-production approaches, procedure, and equipment, and then added their own adaptations (such as the concept of continual refinements and a greater integration of of suppliers into production processes) to reap even greater benefits from them. Thanks to its sophisticated industrial base, Japan exported more than $700 billion worth of goods in 2013, with a heavy weighting toward knowledge-intensive products such as vehicles, industrial equipment, and electronics. Although it has begun to run a trade deficit in recent years, Japan ranks as the world's fourth-leading exporter. Its modern transportation and logistics infrastructure are considered among the best in the world. (Pg. 29)

Japan has the sophisticated R&D (Research and Development) and manufacturing capabilities to develop new products and services—whether in traditional industries or at the cutting edge of fields such as robotics, advanced materials, and genomics. But instead of focusing on the technology itself, the development process has to focus on understanding what the customer wants and delivering solutions based on that insight. (pg. 41)

The Japanese education system of the future would be retooled to instil a more open and global mindset. Top students study abroad and undertake international internships as a core of their experience. Japanese universities hire more foreign faculty and welcome the same share of international students as their leading European counterparts. Entrepreneurship becomes rooted in campus life, with students in Tokyo University dorms cooking up the next Google, Facebook, Alibaba, or Tencent. Government funding for education focuses on developing the specialized skills that are needed by employers as well as the entrepreneurial and creative approaches that spur innovation in the economy more broadly. (Pg. 34)

A greater willingness to collaborate with customers and suppliers can yield new ideas for product development and process refinement based on real-end user insights. New working models (from social media platforms for collaboration to new arrangements of physical office environments) can break down hierarchies and department silos to encourage more innovation from across the the organization. Google and 3M have both been noted for policies that encourage employees to spend some portion of their hours working on personal ideas. Procter & Gamble and GE have both embraced open innovation, starting programs that crowdsource ideas from outside the company for solving design conundrums. Tencent has created an open platform that allows developers to connect with millions of its QQ users to create mobile apps and other products. (Pg.41)

"At a macroeconomic level, Japan needs to maximize the labor force participation of women and older workers. Some of this effort can be addressed by public policy, but much of it depends on the willingness of individual companies to change entrenched norms and attitudes (such as the demands for long hours that make it difficult for new mothers to return to work). It is especially critical for companies to invest in programs that develop and mentor female leaders." (pg. 41)

"Shareholders and top executives have to make it clear that productivity is a top organizational goal. The best way to spur real change is to tie performance goals to an incentive structure." (pg. 41)

"The consumer electronics space has not fared well. The market has shifted toward a greater emphasis on software and integrated platforms…consumer electronics companies need to achieve truly global scale to stay competitive, but Japan's industry has been hampered by fragmentation and an adherence to proprietary standards…Japan has a long-standing global reputation for innovation. It is a leader in patent filings, holding 50% or more of the world's intellectual property in areas such as lithium-ion batteries, articulated robots, and copy machines. Nevertheless, in recent years, Japan has not seen the payoff in terms of growth…This is due in large part to the difficulties entrepreneurs and businesses encounter in commercializing new ideas and cutting edge technologies." (pgs 51 and 53)

"Another driver may the the Japanese approach to R&D (Research and Development). Companies tend to keep their research operations tightly contained rather than taking a more open approach that allows ideas to cross pollinate between different parts of the organization and outside entities. The new norm of collaborative innovation has been embraced more fully by companies in other advanced economies." (pg. 53)

*The inspiration for this lesson were connections that I made as I learned about Japanese business practices. There are many admirable qualities of Japanese businesses and when Americans or Westernized groups offer advice, it is important to recognize those biases and to not assume that the western ideal is the best choice for a given business. Even if that advice can increase profits, the cost of those profits may not be worth it.