

S'pore has what it takes to be creative

BY JOHN BECK
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I HAVE often heard the following comment in Singapore: "Our country can never be known for creativity; we are too rigid, there is not enough openness to encourage individuality and free thought."

But the quote is not Singaporean. It is Japanese. I have heard it hundreds of times there. But, despite the in-country beliefs, Japan is one of the most creative nations on earth. In a global survey of 4,000 people that I did in 2008 with others, in every country we surveyed, Japan ranked either No. 1 or No. 2 (to the United States) in creativity.

From the innovative Toyota Prius to the imaginative Nintendo Wii, utilitarian wash-and-dry Toto toilets and to fanciful cartoon characters with a global following, the Japanese have a long track record of originality.

Based on theory, there is good reason for the Japanese to believe that their environment would not be conducive to ingenuity. After all, creativity literature might lead one to believe that creativity is born of leisure time and freedom from constraints. From this perspective, neither Japan nor Singapore should be creative: Both are rigid social structures full of rules.

But much of Japan's creativity may actually stem directly from structure and rules. While the vast majority of Japanese are quite comfortable living by the rules and are generally not creative, there is a tiny percentage of them who can really claim responsibility for the country's creative reputation.

Often, these creative minds work in industries such as fashion, entertainment, video games, toy manufacturing, and auto and industrial design. This tiny group mingles with the rest of Japanese society in subways, workplaces, bars and shopping malls. They pay taxes, obey laws and raise families.

In most ways, they are indistinguishable from other Japanese. But they have distanced themselves in the way they think and the way they dream. And the velocity required to escape from the nation's rigid social norms seems to have flung them into another dimension - a rarefied mental space inhabited by very few people on earth.

In Japan - probably more than in the US - the group nature of society may then facilitate even a greater percentage of those individual brainstorms becoming commercial realities. Americans pride themselves on their individuality. If you are a true individual, you are not going to kowtow to other individuals - no matter how interesting they are. But in Japan, being a "groupie" of a Creative meets both individual needs ("I'm not part of big, corporate Japan") and social needs ("I get to be part of a really interesting group!").

Japanese individual creativity translates relatively easily into businesses and brands because there are ready-made support groups. And the nation's fascination with the next fad generates a ready market for the most distinctive products and services.

Singapore does not show up on the global list of creative countries now but it could, eventually. This rule-bound society with tight traditional social structures can create the pressure. And there is a ready pool of workers and customers looking for the next "new thing".

Where Singapore could potentially even outdo Japan is in the ability to translate a creative idea into an ingenious product for the rest of the world. Because of cultural and linguistic barriers, non-Japanese ideas get exposed to only a very small portion of Japan's creative output. In contrast, Singapore is positioned to translate creative products and services for the largest markets of the future - the West, India and China.

So, my answer every time I hear Singaporeans pooh-poo the notion of home-grown creativity is: "You may already have the right stuff."

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