

Chapter 9

Made to Last (contd)

Part 2 : Anathema to Economic Growth

Why have we stopped using yukatas in such a sensible way? Well, for one thing, our present-day lifestyle makes the wearing of clothing such as yukatas impractical, but far more than that, successive governments have sought to stimulate economic growth and bring prosperity to the nation by adopting policies that encourage people to throw things away.

Politicians are likely to argue that they have never encouraged throwaway habits. However, while it is true that the government has not resorted to such crude methods as putting up posters calling for people to throw things out after using them once, its policies for spurring rapid economic growth could just as well be regarded as policies for promoting the throwaway society. The proof is in the fact that no ruling party big fish politicians have ever voiced any serious objections to the boorish idea that consumption is noble.

Flourishing consumption is vital to economic growth, and practices such as squeezing every last ounce of value out of a yukata right up to burning it as fuel clearly undermine the promotion of consumption. The traditional Japanese respect for thrift is anathema to economic growth, and the government adopted policies that in effect encouraged the populace to abandon that respect, by making it easy for manufacturers to borrow the money they needed to enable the mass production and supply of low-cost products that consumers would find easy to throw away.

If new products coming onto the market not only look better and offer more in terms of performance, but are also cheap, we're bound to buy them. We're just happy to have found something better for such a reasonable price, and there used to be a time when we were amazed to discover, on enquiring about the repair of a piece of equipment that had broken down, that buying a new product with better performance and even more bells and whistles would be cheaper than paying for the repair of the old one.

However, after several such experiences, the spirit of thrift built up over generation upon generation of our forefathers tends to lose its meaning, and we become more and more taken in by the convenience of the throwaway society. It's after all a lot less bother to throw away a pair of socks than darn any holes that appear. Sure, you're likely to feel a pang of guilt the first time you throw away a pair of socks when one develops a little hole, but given time, you get used to doing so, and don't think twice about it.

What's more, increasing consumption boosts economic growth, which will likely be reflected in increased personal income. The socks that were once such a valuable item now cost very little in relative terms, cheap enough that it's easy just to chuck them in the garbage whenever a hole appears. When you consider the time it takes to darn a hole in a sock, and the fact that buying a new pair will hardly set you back financially, who's going to darn socks these days?

This is basically how Japan achieved the rapid economic growth that made it one of the world's most prosperous nations. And if possible, most of us would have been more than happy to see this situation continue forever, but we find ourselves today facing a disastrous situation of a kind that very few people forty years ago could even imagine - the very real possibility of running out of places to dispose of waste. Unfortunately waste contains an invisible element, a multitude of substances that can poison water supply and create atmospheric pollution, and as a result, just fifty years from its inception, Japan's throwaway civilization finds itself at risk of coming to a standstill. In fact, it would probably be more accurate to say that it has already reached that standstill.

= = =

Copyright(C) 2002-2005 Japan for Sustainability All Rights Reserved.