

"Japan Needs Independent and 'Against the Grain' Thinkers."

Subtitle (2 lines above text, below the title): Kiyoshi Kurokawa investigated the causes of 'Fukushima'. His conclusion: Japan's groupism bears part of the blame for this disaster. 'We don't take responsibility'.

By Wouter van Cleef, Tokyo

"Nothing has changed. My message was put on a shelf." Even though Kiyoshi Kurokawa is a cheerful man, he has difficulty hiding his anger. The message Kurokawa points at is a report he wrote last year about the causes and aftermath of the Fukushima nuclear disaster. In March 2011 the Fukushima nuclear power plant was struck by a large tsunami. Even though the risk of such natural disasters was known, adequate preventative measures were not put in place. Additionally, the response to the disaster was below par, Kurokawa and his fellow committee members concluded.

Commissioned by the Japanese parliament, which for the first time installed an independent investigative committee, Kurokawa delivered a tough message. Japanese culture was a significant factor behind the disaster, Kurokawa wrote: "Its fundamental causes are to be found in the ingrained conventions of Japanese culture: our reflexive obedience; our reluctance to question authority; our devotion to 'sticking with the program'; our groupism; and our insularity."

Pictures of Steve Jobs have a prominent place in Kurokawa's office at the Graduate Institute for Policy Studies in Tokyo. Kurokawa turns out to be a great admirer of the deceased driving innovator and CEO of electronics company Apple.

Where does this Japanese culture of extreme prudence and insularity, that you criticize, stem from?

"Culture is reflected in language. When you read an official Japanese letter containing instructions, it's very difficult to understand whom exactly is supposed to do what; this remains vague and implicit. In European languages this is much clearer. It demonstrates that Japanese attach great value to harmonious relationships. Partly because of our language, Japanese are not used to strong mutual criticism.

One can also witness this trait in corporate meetings. Employees intuitively sense their superior's opinion and they suit their comments accordingly. We are not used to debate in Japan."

What are the consequences of this mindset?

"This lack of contradiction and debate has given rise to a totally wrong attitude among Japanese workers, also among civil servants in the nuclear field. Instead of serving the public interest and public security, they focused on protecting their own departments and jobs.

This form of prudence is exacerbated by the system of job security in Japan. Civil servants who are hired right after graduation from university know that they will have employment until they retire, they are transferred to another position in the same ministry every two years. Thus, they never have to take responsibility for the consequences of their work.

Many Japanese employees are merely interested in their own little world, without a wider vision on their professional responsibilities."

Japan gained a world-class reputation through engineers who kept on improving their inventions. Wouldn't you say that this dedication to one's own speciality is in fact an important driving force behind Japan as an economic powerhouse?

"After long and detailed investigations, Japanese manufacturers can make the perfect television, or an extremely thin lens. This attitude was one of the great strengths of Japan in the postwar economic boom. Tokyo now even has more Michelin star restaurant than Paris! Japanese chefs spent years studying in Europe to study culinary techniques, and now some chefs have surpassed their tutors.

But because of this intense focus of many Japanese, this country lacks a wider vision on the world and ourselves. The lesson of the Fukushima-disaster should have been that we require independent thinkers, who dare to 'go against the grain'. Our elite is too arrogant to recognize this as a weakness."

Culture doesn't change overnight, and you don't seem very hopeful.

“There won't be any quick-fixes. Currently we are once again dawdling with giving international experts access to the stricken Fukushima nuclear power plants. We are in the midst of a global crisis, but Japan maintains its *sakoku*-mentality (Japan's self-elected isolation from the rest of the world between 1633 and 1853).

Japan still retains this attitude of insularity and prudence. Policy makers and politicians are not fully aware of the necessity to strive towards another culture.

The media aren't helpful either, they are incompetent. Journalists hardly do any independent investigation. They wait for news to come out and don't uncover news stories. Basically the press isn't steeped of its journalistic mission: to independently inform the citizens.”

What could bring about cultural change?

“For the long-term, I am quite optimistic. After the disaster, I see a new attitude evolving among many young people. A lot of them didn't immediately go after a career, but instead chose to volunteer in the tsunami affected area. Thus, they adopted a mindset of community service, which is just what we need.

Also, I encourage students and youngsters to spend more time abroad. I think it's important the Japan's homogeneity is challenged. I want young people to adopt a fresh vision of our country, so that they can eventually question its cultural traits. Perhaps, it would already be sufficient if only five percent of people are willing to really make an effort to affect change in our mentality.”