

DECONSTRUCTING 'JAPANISATION': REFLECTIONS FROM THE 'LEARN FROM JAPAN' CAMPAIGN IN SINGAPORE

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In the late 1970s, people throughout the world began to focus their attention on Japan, recognizing for the first time that this Asian state had not only caught up with other states but in fact had surged ahead as a rising superpower in the world economy. In a short span of thirty years after WWII, the Japanese had accumulated a record trade surplus and foreign exchange reserves to become the world's second strongest economy after the U.S. The economic supremacy of Japan was well expressed by Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew in his 1980 National Day speech, where he referred to Japan as a country which formed 3 per cent of the world's population, 0.3 per cent of the total world's land area and 10 per cent of the world's GNP (*The Straits Times*, 18 Aug 1980).

Japan's economic miracle aroused great interest among world leaders and industrialists who were keen to know how Japan had made it and what was its winning formula. Ezra Vogel's book, *Japan as Number One* (1979) was a timely release that soon contributed to the rush in America, as well as Southeast Asian countries, to learn from Japan. It was inevitable for Singapore to be among those who jumped on the bandwagon of the 'learn from Japan' drive. Singapore's economy has suffered tremendously during the first oil crisis (1973-74) because of the low value-added and high labour-

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intensive nature of its industrial focus. To remain competitive in the international market, the government embarked on economic restructuring in 1979 to shift the economy towards high value-added, skill-intensive and high technology industries. Japan as an economic high-flyer seemed a perfect model to help Singapore achieve its new economic goal.

The 'Learn from Japan' drive was indeed fervent in Singapore in the early to mid-1980s. Japan was the reference 'other' in many of the leaders' speeches. Lee Kuan Yew, who initiated the 'Learn from Japan' campaign, had, on various occasions, praised the Japanese and urged Singaporeans to learn from them. His successor, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, continued to model Singapore after Japan – in diverse areas, from economics to politics. He urged Singaporeans to display the same Japanese 'core values' of hard work, thrift and sacrifice; he suggested that Singaporeans looked up to Japan's highly educated workforce. When Goh was urging Singaporean businesses to venture abroad in 1986, Japan was constructed as the model to follow, "when exports became more difficult because the cost of manufacturing them in Japan had gone up, they relocated their plants in countries where labour costs were lower." In the mid-1980s, there were even brief inconclusive talks on modelling Singapore's ruling People's Action Party on Japan's governing Liberal Democratic Party (Holloway 1991:111-112). The enthusiasm among the leaders to emulate Japan has generated uneasiness among some critics. As early as 1981, the catch phrase 'learn from Japan' appeared so frequently in the mass media that it created the impression that Singapore was "bent on making itself the Japan of Southeast Asia" (*The Straits Times*, 12 April 1981). In the state's zealotry to adopt Japanese practices, jokes about whether Singaporeans would become 'Japanised' – eating sushi and wearing kimono – were not uncommon, particularly among the business community.

At first glance, 'Japanisation' seemed to conform to the "flying geese model."³ In this developmental model, Japan would play the role of the "lead goose" amongst the Asian economies, while other Asian countries were to follow and replicate the Japanese development experience to reach the level of manufacturing sophistication achieved by the Japanese and those other 'geese' ahead of them in a V-formation (Pempel, 1997:52). As a leader, Japan would support the campaign with generous aid and technical assistance. However, in this paper, we argue that it is inadequate to use the notion of 'Japanisation' to understand the 'learn from Japan' movement in Singapore.⁴ At least for the case of Singapore, even if the nation is considered part of the V-formation, as manifested through its eagerness to emulate Japan, it is doubtful whether it had perceived Japan as the ultimate leader of the fleet.

Unlike Malaysia, which launched the "Look East" policy that was announced by Prime Minister Mahathir in December 1981, Singapore's efforts to learn from Japan – although a clear endorsement from the leaders – has

³ The "flying geese model" was first proposed by Japanese professor Kaname Akamatsu in the 1930s (see Pempel 1997:52)

⁴ For an example of more recent discussion of 'Japanisation', see Elger, Tony and Chris Smith eds., 1994.

never been declared a policy *per se*. Instead, the government was quick to respond to accusations of its over-zealousness in emulating Japan. For example, Mr Lee Yock Suan, Minister of State (National Development) and deputy chairman of the National Productivity Board, was careful to state that although the government sees the Japanese management system as an "excellent model" for Singapore, "we are also receptive to good management ideas from the US, Europe and elsewhere." (*The Straits Times*, 17 August 1982).

The desire to learn from Japan appears to stem from an admiration of Japan's ideology of *wakon yōsai* (和魂洋才 Japanese spirit, Western technology) advocated during the Meiji Restoration. The state's interest to learn from Japan was first made public during the President's address at the opening of the Parliament on 8 February 1977, when the President urged that we must learn the experience of the Japanese – how in less than a hundred years since the Meiji Restoration of 1868, they have become a modern industrial state, without abandoning their own cultural traditions. Their experience is more relevant to us than those of the countries of Western Europe, the exceptions are perhaps Western Germany and Switzerland." Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong also emphasized this after he assumed office. As Holloway has claimed, "as far as Goh is concerned, Japan is No. One because it has succeeded in absorbing the best of Western technology and research to fuel its economic success without losing its cultural identity" (1991:111). These statements show that Singapore's leaders believed it was worth learning from Japan for two reasons: first, because the Japanese showed how to emulate the West without losing one's own identity; and second, the Japanese model was superior because it represented a Western model 're-conditioned' to suit the Asian context. This notion deconstructs the Japanese model as quintessentially Japanese and implicit in this notion is the assumption that Singapore is generally 'looking West'.⁵ Nevertheless, the Japanese model is desirable because it is 'safer' than the Western model, having filtered out the 'undesirable' Western elements in the course of its adoption.⁶

If we look beyond the narrow focus of the Japanese model as comprising primarily the management system, and rather define the Japanese model as embodying the characteristics of Japan's political and economic system, then Singapore seems to have already shared some common features with the Japanese model. According to Johnson (1982), the chief mechanisms of the Japanese model are as follows: selective access to governmental or government-guaranteed financing, targeted tax breaks, government-supervised investment coordination in order to keep all participants profitable, the equitable allocation of burden by the state during times of adversity,

⁵ Among countries in the West, Germany and Switzerland have been given much emphasis. A recent speech by Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew shows that the state favours the Swiss model (*The Straits Times*, 16 February 2000).

⁶ Singapore's leaders have expressed the fear that the indiscriminate importation from the West would result in social conflict and worst, the dominance of 'undesirable' Western cultural practices and attitudes.

government assistance in the commercialization and sale of products, and governmental assistance when an industry as a whole begins to decline. All these mechanisms are not uncommon to Singapore, nor to the other newly industrialized economies of Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong. The uniqueness of the Japanese model thus becomes questionable when we consider the members of the 'chopstick culture' that share influences of Confucianism.

In the following, we trace the developments of some of the initiatives taken by the government during the 'learn from Japan' campaign in the early to mid-1980s. The paper concludes with some observations about recent developments regarding Japanese influence.

Developing a knowledge of Japan

One of the most effective ways to learn from a country is to build up a base of locals with a sound knowledge of that country. As Japan is known to be a closed society, it would be ideal to have, in the words of Lee, "specialists who could fathom the thinking of Japan and be able to read in Japanese without having to rely on translated versions" (*The Straits Times*, 21 Oct 1986). Seah interpreted this as someone who could "deal with Japanese on Japanese home ground conditions" (Seah 1994:102). Among the benefits for Japan specialists was the hope that they would help open up the Japanese market and enhance Singapore's bargaining strength in wooing increasing Japanese investments in the 1980s. One most efficient way to produce such specialists was to encourage Singaporeans to study in Japan. However, Japan has not been a popular destination for students studying overseas. The Japanese University Graduates Association of Singapore (JUGAS), established in 1970, has only about 400 members, of which one-third are Malaysians working in Singapore.

Post-war enrolment of Singapore students in Japanese universities began in 1956, when there were two students studying medicine in Japan. The number increased considerably between 1958-62, and peaked in 1960-61, when there were four students on scholarships offered by the Japanese Ministry of Education (Monbusho) for the first time, and about 50 private students. Numerous reasons contributed to this 'boom' during this period. Firstly, compared with the U.S. and the U.K., school fees in Japan were cheaper then. Secondly, Japan was popular among the Chinese-educated (from a Chinese medium education) because of the perception that it was easy for someone already fluent in Chinese to learn Japanese. Thirdly, Japanese movies also played a part in constructing a romantic perception of Japan. Fourthly, many Chinese-educated students also expressed admiration for Japan's efforts during the Meiji Restoration, the period when Japanese had succeeded in making Japan a strong nation. The number of Singaporean students enrolling into Japanese varsities declined since 1963 for reasons to be discussed shortly. Nonetheless, Monbusho scholarships to Singaporean

students increased from four in 1961 to eight in 1970s, and subsequently to 14 in the late 1980s.

The increase in scholarships offered to Singaporean students in 1983 was related to Premier Nakasone's announcement to increase the number of foreign students in Japan from less than 20,000 to more than 100,000 in a decade's time. This was announced after his visit to ASEAN countries in May 1983. The desire to attract more foreign students to Japan grew partly from the rise in demand for graduates from Japan as Japanese companies expanded their operations overseas from the 1970s onwards. The issue of foreign students in Japan also came into focus after a dialogue session between Nakasone and the graduates from Japan in Singapore, where he learnt to his surprise that even graduates from Japan expressed hesitation in sending their own children for further study in Japan. Today, only a handful of *ryūgakusei-nisei* 留学生二世 (children of graduates) receive further education in Japan.

Nakasone's plan offered limited help in boosting the number of foreign students in Japan and more than a decade later the number still fell far below the target of 100,000. In 1999, there were less than 60,000 foreign students in Japan, of which more than 80% are from Taiwan, Korea and China. Among the students from ASEAN countries, which accounted for less than 5000 of the foreign student population, Malaysia registered the largest number of 1000 – a reflection of its 'Look East policy'. Singapore only had 150 students, of which about half were Monbusho scholars. This breaks down to only about 30 students in each level, including the first year of language study. Although Monbusho offers 14 scholarships to Singaporeans annually, in 1999, only 13 places were filled, and in 2000 the take-up rate dropped to 8.

There are several factors that have led to the unpopularity of pursuing further studies in Japan. First, Singaporeans generally prefer to enter higher educational institutions in North America, UK and Australia rather than Japan because of the extra year required to master the Japanese language. Second, contrary to the situations in the 1960s, it has become very costly to study in Japan due to the yen appreciation, high tuition and living costs. Third, there are concerns that locals – even those who graduated from Japan – have little opportunity to be promoted to top positions in Japanese enterprises because of the common practice for overseas Japanese enterprises to nurture only Japanese for top management posts. Among JUGAS members, only about one-third of them are working in jobs relating to Japan. Last but not least, the lack of encouragement from the Singapore government further contributed to its unpopularity. In the 1980s, there were very few, if any, government scholarships offered for recipients to go to Japan, other than those offered by Monbusho. There have also been concerns among graduates from Japan on the accreditation of their degrees from Japan. It is only in the recent years that the Public Service Commission (PSC) has formed a committee to review the issue of recognizing Japanese university degrees. The conflicting attitudes of the government towards pursuing a degree in Japan – a contrast with its attempt to learn from Japan – shows the persistence in preference for degrees

from English-speaking countries which reflects the legacy of a British colonial past.

The lack of Japan specialists who have graduated from Japan is compensated for by the presence of the Department of Japanese Studies at the National University of Singapore (NUS). The Department of Japanese Studies, established in 1981, is a testimony to the state's serious attempt to learning from Japan. The idea of setting up such a centre for learning about Japan was first proposed by Lee Kuan Yew to his counterpart, Ohira Masayoshi, during the 1979 official visit to Japan.⁷ The idea soon took root and, with help from Japan, the centre was established as a department in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences of the National University of Singapore. The Department of Japanese Studies aims to produce locals with a deeper understanding of Japan, and a thorough appreciation of Japanese social and cultural values as well as Japanese institutions and practices. Graduates of the department are also expected to obtain a satisfactory knowledge of the Japanese language.

The number of undergraduates enrolled with the Department of Japanese Studies at NUS has grown from 54 in 1981/82 to 915 in the 1999/2000 session. If we include students who take Japanese Studies as an elective, the number saw an increase from 115 in 1981/82 to 1495 in 1999/2000. The number of students opting to get into the course has always been much higher than the actual number enrolled. Even after a decline in the state's emphasis on learning from Japan in the 1990s, following Japan's prolonged recession, interest among students for this course remains high.

The Department has in the last decade produced graduates who contribute in various capacities to Japan-Singapore economic and cultural developments. Similar to graduates from Japan, they find employment in Japanese enterprises, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and trade development offices, all of which require some knowledge of the Japanese language. However, the Department has not produced a large group of Japan-experts, although some graduates have gone on to pursue higher degree in Japan. Given the constraints of the university system, which limited the exposure to Japanese language learning, few graduates obtain a good command of the language.

In the course of its development, the Department has moved beyond its initial objective, which was closely related to the 'learn from Japan' syndrome. Dr. Seah Chee Meow, who was head of the Department of Japanese Studies from 1986 to 1997, redefined the Department's objective upon his headship in 1986, stating that "whilst the focus was to learn as much as possible of Japan, this was to be from a Singapore-oriented perspective. Students should have self-esteem and a respect for their own culture before trying to seek what another culture has to offer." He used the analogy of "bonsai" versus "rubber tree" to reiterate his vision for the department, where the department should be "blooming like the economically beneficial rubber tree transplanted in a

⁷ There were two other proposals made during this visit, namely the proposal for a Japan-Singapore Institute of Information and the possibility of assistance by Japan to the Engineering Faculty at the National University of Singapore (Seah 1994).

Singapore-based soil yet growing luxuriantly. Our graduates would be the new seedlings – able to grow comfortably and yet appreciating the benefits of the original and transplanted cultures” (Seah 1994). This redefined objective reflects a cautious effort against ‘Japanisation’ and emphasizes the position of learning from another society from within Singapore’s cultural context. Such cautiousness is well exercised when the government considers the adoption of the Japanese model in the local context.

Adopting Japanese management system

To most, the ‘learn from Japan’ movement in the 1980s centred on the adoption of its management system, where the ‘package’ of lifetime employment, a seniority wage system and in-house unionism was said to be uniquely Japanese. Singapore was no exception in its enthusiasm to adopt a Japanese-style of management in its big companies, with radio commentaries used to teach the public about the Japanese system (Singapore Broadcasting Corporation, 1982).

To determine the feasibility of introducing this system to Singapore, opinions were actively sought from various experts, including Ezra Vogel, who visited Singapore in 1981 and appeared in at least two televised interviews and one televised forum, where he offered advice to Singaporeans on what and how to learn from Japan. Japanese experts and academics were also frequently invited by the Economic Development Board (EDB), the Trade Development Board (TDB), and the National Productivity Board (NPB) to give talks and seminars to local managers and government officials. In addition, numerous study missions were dispatched to Japan to gather first-hand information about the Japanese management system. However, despite wide attention on the issues, it was soon realized that the idea to adopt the three pillars of Japanese management system in Singapore was infeasible.

As Lim noted in his analysis of Japanese-style management in Singapore, “the Singapore government was quick to realize that Japanese managerial systems were not applicable to enterprises in Singapore, even to Japanese-affiliated enterprises” (Lim 1995:107). He suggested aspects of Singaporean culture, including individualism (versus groupism), lack of loyalty to one’s company and the heterogeneity of the society (versus homogeneous society) as some of the significant factors that made Japanese management in Singapore impractical and inapplicable.

Following the swift decision to drop the whole idea of adopting the Japanese management style, talks about a search for Singapore’s own style of management briefly emerged. In May 1982, the National Productivity Board announced that Singapore would evolve its own management style rather than adopt an existing system, “as the family is the cornerstone of our society, it is

thought not practical to switch to a group culture that has the company as the basic cultural unit” (*The Straits Times*, 28 May 1982).⁸

Adoption the concept of Quality Control Circles (QCC)

Although the impracticability of applying a Japanese-style management system to companies in Singapore was recognized, the government has always viewed the Productivity Movement in Japan favourably. The Japanese Productivity Movement began in 1955 and was said to be instrumental in helping the nation to resist setbacks and achieve high economic growth in the 1960s and 1970s. The Movement is particularly praised for having cultivated good workers with correct work attitudes.

Improving working attitudes among the workers has been the concern of Singapore leaders. Lee Kuan Yew’s National Day message in 1980 brought to the nation’s attention the problems of poor work attitudes among Singaporeans – including the reluctance to do shift work and adherence to narrow job specifications – which have resulted in complaints by foreign companies about Singapore workers (*The Straits Times*, 16 Aug 1980). With the stress on better work attitudes among workers, which was seen as a key to the success of Singapore’s economic restructuring, the government was eager to adopt Japanese tactics to promote productivity. In particular, the concept of Quality Control Circles (QCC) to promote teamwork and improve work attitudes was perhaps the most well publicized adoption of the Japanese model in the 1980s. The QCC concept has its origin in the U.S., and specifically to Walter Deming, who introduced the concept of Quality Control (QC) to the Japanese in 1950.⁹ As an organizational device to induce employee’s participation and promote problem solving through group discussion, QCC fits well into the group-oriented philosophy in Japanese companies.

In Singapore, some companies had already adopted QCC as a productivity tool before the ‘learn from Japan’ movement. The first QCC was set up by Bridgestone (Singapore) Pte. Ltd, a tyre manufacturing company in 1973. Subsequently, a few companies, such as Hewlett Packard, Yokogawa, Sanwa Bank and Chartered Industries started to form QCCs during the period 1978-1980 (Chan, 1990).

National efforts to publicize QCC began with the Productivity Movement in 1981. In April 1981, a Committee on Productivity was formed

⁸ Although Japanese companies are familialist in nature, this differs from the quote’s mention of ‘family’ which refers to the biological unit.

⁹ Walter Deming is a major figure responsible for introducing the concept of QC to the Japanese in early 1950s through his lectures at the JUSE (Japanese Union of Scientists and Engineers). In 1961, Kaoru Ishikawa from the University of Tokyo incorporated Japanese ideas into the concept and coined the QCC work system. In 1974, the QCC concept ‘returned’ to the U.S. (Manning and Curtis 1988; Onglatcs 1988).

to map out the objectives and strategies for improving productivity in the nation. Inspired by the Japanese experience, the Committee's recommendations followed the Japanese model of productivity closely. This led to the nation-wide launching of the Productivity Movement and the QCC Movement in 1981, to promote teamwork and positive work attitudes among the workers. These movements were funded mainly through the Productivity Development Project (PDP) in the period 1983-1990, a fund supported by a grant of US\$20 million from the Japanese Government (NPB, 1992a).

The Productivity movement soon went into full swing. 'Teamy the Bee', the mascot used to promote teamwork, became a familiar figure in the mass media and in the public domain during the Productivity Movement. Through its PDP, the NPB jointly developed a series of courses with the Japan Productivity Centre to promote the productivity concepts of QCCa, as well as JIT (Just-in-time) and OJT (On-the-job training) – the two other mechanisms promoted through the Productivity Movement. Japanese experts from various fields were frequently invited to share their experiences in promoting productivity.

The 1980s was a vigorous period of QCC implementation. In 1982, the NPB established the National Registration Centre (NRC) for QC circles. In 1983, a newsletter for QCC, focusing on QC techniques and events, called *Teamworker* was launched. In 1984, a QC College was set up to provide training relating to QCC. To encourage the sharing of experiences, the first national QCC Convention was held in 1982, and the first International Expositions of QC Circles (IEQCC) was organized in 1984, to which QCC from other countries were invited to participate and share their experiences with the local counterparts. The NPB also initiated QCC Clubs (1984), the Singapore Association of QC Circles (1985) and a QCC Camp (1985). Study teams were sent to Japan and other countries with strong QCC movements, including Taiwan, Korea and the US. Japanese opinions were closely sought in promoting QCC. In 1984, the NPB launched the QCC Clinic, an advisory session attended by Japanese experts.

The active promotion of QCC resulted in a rapid increase in membership. Registration for QCC and WITS (Work Improvement Teams) at the NRC showed a rise from 1,265 circles in 1983 to an accumulated total of 24,554 by the end of 1999. Total membership had risen from 9,344 to 195,986 during the same period. The number of participating organizations grew from 92 in 1983 to 415 by 1999. An international comparison of BERI ratings on Singapore's workforce showed considerable improvements in productivity in the decade between 1980 and 1991.¹⁰

However, the success of the QCC movement was limited by various drawbacks and problems in implementation. Although the accumulative figure on QCC participation looks impressive, it does not take into account the attrition rate. In the surveys conducted in 1983, 1985 and 1987 by the NPB to monitor the development of the QCC initiative, it was found that although

¹⁰ A U.S.-based organization, Business Environmental Risk Intelligence (BERI) uses several indicators to rate the quality of workforces across countries.

the participation rate in the private sector improved from 21% in 1983 to 26% in 1985, it dropped to 17% in 1987 (*Teamworker*, Nov/Dec 1988).¹¹ When tabulated against the percentage of the total workforce, of the 5.7% workforce participation rate in 1992, only 1.6% came from the private sector. Although there was a reported an increase to 9.4% of the workforce in 1997, of which participation in the private sector increased to 4%, it is not known how many circles actually remain active (<http://www.psb.gov.sg>).¹²

QCC suffers from a lack of management support, particularly from the private sector, because quite often the managers themselves are vague about the productivity movement and are hesitant about supporting programs that require additional expenditure. This also explains why it is more commonly practiced only in the government and statutory boards, as well as in big companies and multi-national corporations such as Philips Singapore, Singapore Press Holdings, Matsushita and Sony.

Similar to the problems that were foreseen in adopting lifetime employment and a seniority-based wage system in Singapore, social and cultural differences deter effective implementation of QCC. Several factors are important for QCC to thrive in Japan; this includes the need for dedication of the workers to their job and company. However, job-hopping is not uncommon in Singapore; workers also do not find it attractive to participate in small group discussions, especially in instances where they have to meet after working hours without overtime pay compensation.

Low educational levels among the workers further hampers QCC implementation. The educational profile of the labour force between Japan (1993) and Singapore (1994) showed that those who had attained a degree comprised 17% and 10% of the respective workforce; while those with below secondary school education made up 23% and 43% of the workforce respectively (Ministry of Labour, 1995). The figure was much lower when Singapore first adopted the QCC movement in early 1980s. In 1982, 57% of the labour force had either no education or primary-level and below; only 3% attained a degree. (*The Straits Times*, 12 Aug 1982).

Publicity on QCC gradually dwindled towards the end of the 1980s, although activities to promote and sustain QCC continued and new activities were implemented. In 1989, the new QCC awards were launched; in 1992, a national QCC task force was formed and a QCC Resource Centre established. As the Japanese economy went through a prolonged recession, reference to Japan lost its significance. Among the 'learn from Japan' programs introduced during the Productivity Movement in early 1980s, OJT seems to be the only one that gained any emphasis during the 1990s. After noticing that many companies, although they provide some form of OJT, did not have a

¹¹ Participation rate is defined as the percentage of employees involved in QCC activities in a company, and is obtained by dividing the total number of ACC members by the total staff strength of the organization (*Teamworker* Nov/Dec 1988).

¹² The PSB (Singapore Productivity and Standards Board) was formed in April 1996 after a merger between the NPB and the SISIR (Singapore Institute of Standards and Industrial Research).

well structured and carefully planned OJT program for their workers, the OJT 2000 Plan was introduced in 1993 to promote structured OJT among companies.¹³ This plan has now been expanded to include all industries (<http://www.psb.gov.sg>).

The QCC movement in Singapore represents one example of an initiative that was introduced with the 'learn from Japan' syndrome in early 1980s but now is given little emphasis as the tide subsides. It also highlights the impracticability of reproducing an imported idea in its totality. The problems that were encountered with the implementation of an imported idea, nevertheless, provide a useful reflection of the reality facing Singapore's workforce. It has helped the PSB (the Singapore Productivity and Standards Board, into which the NPB was incorporated in 1996) to move beyond QCC and to focus more on ways to address local constraints. For example, in recognizing that 40% of the workforce has less than secondary education, national programs on training workers on basic literacy and numeracy skills have been developed and grants provided to better equip these workers.

Adopting *kōban* in community policing

One of the more successful efforts to learn from Japan is exemplified by the Neighbourhood Police Post (NPP) system in the Republic of Singapore Police Force (RSP). The NPP system is modelled after the *kōban* 交番 (police box) system in Japan. First launched in 1983 as a pilot project, with eight NPPs, by 1989 there were 91 NPPs throughout the island. Police assigned to NPPs formed 25% of Singapore's total police force (Bayley 1989:7). The NPP system signified a new era of policing in Singapore, where the fundamental strategy of policing was shifted in a short time from a reactive, incident-centred mode of operation to community policing. It also demanded that police officers change from a legalistic-style to a service-style of relating with the public.

In a study of community policing in Singapore, Bayley claimed that, oddly enough, there had been little reason for the RSP to adopt such a major paradigm shift. In the early 1980s, crime was hardly at a crisis level: in 1984, the crime rate was low in Singapore, at 1,635 per 10,000. In comparison, Tokyo's crime rate was 2,139 and New York's 8,773 (Bayley 1989:19). Nevertheless, there were several factors that compelled Singapore to adopt community policing. First, the relocation of most of Singapore's population to dense, high-rise public housing blocks has resulted in requests from the citizens as well as politicians for the presence of more police sub-stations within the housing estates. Second, although the crime rate in Singapore is low in

¹³ See NPB, Productivity Statement, 1992, p.85. Japanese companies here are defined as companies with capital input from Japan, which can either be wholly Japanese-owned or a joint-venture.

absolute terms, there was a disturbing trend showing a rise in all types of crime, except violent property crimes. Thus, there was the hope that community policing would help prevent crime through community cooperation, especially with regard to crimes such as house-breaking, the theft of vehicles and robbery, all of which might be prevented with a higher-level of crime prevention awareness. Third, there was the expectation that the shift towards community-oriented policing would contribute towards effective use of manpower in the RSP. Finally, the adoption of community policing in general and the NPP system in particular reiterate yet another of the government's efforts to learn from Japan; in this case, the desire to replicate the success of community policing and its mechanism – the *kōban* system in Japan (Quah and Quah 1987; Bayley, 1989).

Similar to the QCC system, *kōban* was not invented by the Japanese. It came into existence during the Meiji period through recommendation by a captain of the Berlin Metropolitan Police, Henrich Fried Wilhelm John, who was, at the time, advisor to the Home Minister (Ames, 1981). The system has since evolved to become a characteristic feature of the Japanese police force today. In Japan, *kōban* officers not only focus on crime prevention and crime investigation, but also respond to non-crime related matters and other needs of the residents. This system promotes a friendly police-citizen relationship through routine family visits and frequent patrolling on foot or bicycle. This regular patrol duty has resulted in the common reference to these police officers as *omawarisan* お巡りさん, which means Mr. Walkabout. The *kōban* itself also serves as a social place to promote interaction between the officers and residents (Lei 1987).

It is a radical departure from 'learning from the West' for the RSP to emulate the Japanese. In the early 1980s, the government of Singapore invited a British team to review police operations, but then did not accept its mechanical proposal of increasing the number of divisions from 8 to 15. It was thought that the increase would decentralize command but would not change the traditional practice of policing (Bayley 1989:7). Instead, a radical plan to create 91 NPPs was endorsed by the Government in 1982 – a plan derived from a draft report by the RSP in support of community policing after visits to Japan by the Minister of Home Affairs and a subsequent police study group in 1981. The Japanese government provided help to establish the NPP system. To prepare for the launching of a pilot project in 1983, the Japanese Government, through its International Cooperation Agency, sent a team to train the middle- and lower-rank officers who would staff the NPPs. The Japanese also sent observers to study the pilot project after it was implemented (Bayley 1989:30).

The NPP system has received a favourable response from the public since the concept was implemented. A study of the effectiveness of the pilot project of eight NPPs in 1983-84 concluded that with neighbourhood posts the residents were more likely to have a positive orientation towards the police and regarded them as friends, not merely as law enforcers. Co-operation between the police and the residents also resulted in a fall in the crime rate,

illustrating the role of the NPP in crime prevention. Interestingly, with improved police-public rapport, the total number of police reports increased by 45%, as more people reported minor thefts (Bayley 1989:23).

The NPP system seems to have mirrored the *kōban* system in its function and form. The two systems share similar objectives in community-oriented policing. However, as Bayley cautioned,

one should not expect the *kōban* system to function in Singapore as it had in Japan. Singaporeans are not Japanese and their problems of public safety and crime prevention are not identical. Singapore must learn from Japan's institutions to suit its own needs (1983:44).

In its years of implementation, the NPP system has indeed developed characteristics unique to local conditions. One distinction between the NPP system in Singapore and the *kōban* system in Japan lies in the NPP's close relations with grassroots organizations. The NPP link directly into the grassroots structure in the community; the officers attend the monthly meetings held by the Citizen's Consultative Committees (CCC) and Resident's Committees (RC).¹⁴ The NPP inspector also liaises with the Community Centre Management Committee and Crime Prevention Committee for businesses present in each constituency.

Although *kōban* officers have contacts with neighbourhood associations in Japan, and rely on them as a convenient medium for communicating with local residents, the neighbourhood associations are not co-opted nor are the *kōban* expected to be integrated with the grassroots in the same manner as the police posts in Singapore (Lei 1987/88; Bestor 1989).¹⁵

The recent revamp of the NPP system in 1997 is moving the image of NPP further away from its resemblance with the *kōban*. In a change in focus from community-based policing to community-focused policing, there is a 're-centralizing' of several NPPs into a larger unit called Neighbourhood Police Centres (NPC). The first NPC was set up in Queenstown in October 1997; by June 2001, there were 32 NPCs island-wide. The NPC system provides one-stop service to the community. In particular, it differs from the NPP system by training front-line officers to take charge of minor crime cases and to conduct basic investigations. Under the NPP system, NPP officers have laughingly been referred by regular police officers as "No Powers Police" because, in order not to contradict with their friendly image in the community, they do not make arrests and criminal cases are referred to investigators

¹⁴ There is one CCC in each parliamentary constituency. Below CCC are the RC, which represent zones of 6 to 10 blocks of private or HDB housing. Representative from RCs made up most of the CCC members. The local Member of Parliament chairs the CCC, which comes under the Ministry of Community Development and Sports (Bayley 1989).

¹⁵ In pre-war Japan, *kōban*, together with the neighbourhood associations were the basic units for national integration. After the war, the *kōban* retains their community-oriented type of policing but are primarily concerned with providing services to the community (Lei 1987/88:50).

(Bayley 1989:15; Singapore Police Force Report 1997/98). The revamp indicates on-going efforts by the RSP to derive more effective ways of functioning under the concept of community policing. Although the RSP might have jumped into the Japanese model readily in 1983, developments in the course of more than a decade have shown that the Japanese experience should be more appropriately referred to as a point of departure for one to consider and realize what is more feasible in local conditions.

“Learning from Japan” in the 1990s

During the 1990s, prolonged recession in Japan along with increasing criticism of Japanese management systems brought the whole paradigm of ‘learning from Japan’ to an end. In place of the rush to learn from Japan, Pempel claims that “there is widespread skepticism in much of Asia about the wisdom of emulating any alleged ‘Japanese model’, following Japan’s leadership, or allowing Japan to be Asia’s main bridge to the West” (1997:76).

However, despite a troubled Japan today, it is still a much-advanced society compared with the rest of Asia and undoubtedly still has much to offer in nearly all sectors. Thus, learning from Japan still continues – albeit without much public emphasis – particularly in the government sector in Singapore. Japan is ‘consulted’ as and when necessary, and quite often used for brainstorming on particular issues. For example, in 1997 when the government examined policies to cope with an aging population, the nursing-care insurance scheme in Japan, itself an adaptation of a German model, was explored for its suitability in the Singapore context; study missions to Japan by the relevant ministries were organized to learn how the elderly are cared for in the community and in institutions. Taking lessons from Japan also includes the alternate perspective of taking the Japanese Occupation of Singapore during the Second World War as a lesson to promote self-defence among Singaporeans. The fall of Singapore to the Japanese army on February 15 has been designated as the ‘Total Defence Day.’

In general, the few initiatives from the ‘learn from Japan’ movement examined in this paper share similar developments: from initial assistance provided by Japan and close emulation of the Japanese model to eventual modifications to suit local characteristics and constraints. Thus, there is little ground for concern about ‘Japanisation’, even during the ‘learn from Japan’ movement. On the contrary, it is paradoxical that Japanese influence is extremely modest when compared with the prominent Japanese presence in Singapore since the ‘learn from Japan’ era.

The ‘learn from Japan’ movement has developed in the period when Japanese prominence increased through their overseas investments. Japan is one of the major investor countries in Singapore. Japanese investment overseas has increased rapidly since the mid-1970s, prompted by *yen* appreciation and inflation in Japan. In 1986, following the drastic *yen* appreciation and the liberalisation of foreign investment regimes in Singapore,

Japan's investment in Singapore became the largest of any foreign country, reaching a record 42% and exceeding the 37% from the US and 18% from Europe (Lim, 1995:79). With increased Japanese direct foreign investment, the Japanese community in Singapore expanded rapidly. By late 1990s, there were about 2,600 Japanese companies and about 28,000 Japanese expatriates in Singapore.¹⁶ During the peak, around 1997, there were as many as 35,000 Japanese expatriates on the island. The Japanese school in Singapore has become the largest school of its kind outside Japan; and various businesses catering to the community, including Japanese department stores and restaurants dotted the island.

In the recent years, however, debates on 'Japanisation' began to surface again as the craze for consuming Japanese popular culture – including Japanese popular songs, drama, comics, Hello Kitty toys, Pokemon games, Japanese street fashion and even sushi, sweeps across Asia (Thang 1999). Japanese is today the most popular foreign language among Singaporeans. Besides courses at tertiary education, there are about 20 other private establishments that provide Japanese language instruction. The Japan Cultural Society, which started conducting Japanese language courses in 1964, is the largest among these establishments, with a current enrolment of about 2500 students. This makes up almost half the number of learners in Singapore. In recent years, the motivation to learn Japanese appears to have gradually changed from the desire to work for Japanese-related companies, to the desire to master Japanese so that one can understand Japanese drama and songs. It is interesting to note that a recent survey by Dr. Chang Han-Yin from the Sociology Department of the National University of Singapore found that 10% of young Singaporeans of Chinese descent indicated that they would rather be Japanese (*The Straits Times*, December 18 1999).

Despite the onset of apparent 'Japan invasion' in the (popular) cultural sphere, as the discussion on 'Japanisation' in the 'learn from Japan' movement shows, it would be an oversimplification to equate the popularity in the consumption of Japanese culture with 'Japanisation.' We will need to weigh this against Western influence, which has continued to dominate the society. Nevertheless, the emerging global prominence of Japanese culture offers yet another interesting perspective into the paradigm of emulating Japan, both in Singapore and other countries.

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¹⁶ As noted above (n.13), Japanese companies here are defined as companies with capital input from Japan, which can either be wholly Japanese-owned or a joint-venture.

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