

Land of the (early) rising sun

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They say that early to bed, early to rise, makes one healthy, wealthy and wise; but in Japan, it may also be feeding a nationalist revival not seen since World War II.

New research from Cambridge University reveals how a countrywide preoccupation with getting up early, last seen in Japan in the first half of the 20th century, is making a comeback. Furthermore, the study adds that in some cases it bears the hallmarks of a "conscious and co-ordinated attempt" to foster national identity.

Many commentators and critics believe that Japan is presently undergoing a nationalist revival. Recent governments have, for example, tried to review Article Nine - the famous "no war" clause at the heart of the country's pacifist constitution - explicitly for the sake of national pride. They have also passed a law that requires schools to teach students how to be patriotic.

Dr Brigitte Steger, a University lecturer in Modern Japanese Studies who wrote the new report, argues that the fad for early rising is a more subtle manifestation of the same trend.

"The key reason for the revival in early rising culture is that it teaches people to control their emotions, feelings and desires," she said. "It is training in spiritual determination so that people feel motivated to contribute selflessly to a common cause.

"That cause can often be economic, but there are clear signs that many

of these movements encourage people to take pride in their country and the part they play in Japanese life. In some ways, they are being urged to overcome their own spiritual weaknesses and replace them with nationalist pride."

The report appears in a new book, *Worlds Of Sleep*, which Dr Steger also co-edited. She wrote her analysis after months of fieldwork and archival work in Japan during which she studied attitudes towards sleep and interviewed people about their sleeping habits.

She found evidence that early rising is fast becoming a social duty, and even a point of honour, for the Japanese. Initiatives such as the Tokyo-based *asa expos* (morning expos), which offer commuters early-morning workshops on topics ranging from yoga to coffee-brewing, have sprung up across the country in recent years. Companies and schools are increasingly scheduling compulsory sessions in gymnastics, sports and reading before the working day begins.

People who do not get up early, Dr Steger was told, are even regarded as *darashi ga nai* - meaning that they do not lead a "proper life" and cannot be entrusted with difficult assignments at work. The pressure on people to get up early, even when they have to stay up in the evenings, has also led to a surge in sales of energy and vitamin drinks to help them make it through the day. About 150 different kinds of drink are available to Japanese customers, with roughly 1,260 million bottles sold annually.

The report suggests that this growing national concern with early rising has parallels with a similar craze that occurred in the decades before World War II. During the early 20th century, government-sponsored "early rising" associations were established in every village throughout the country. The aim was to encourage self-discipline among the general population, but it was also believed that foregoing morning sleep led to the development of a healthy, sound person who would be able to

contribute to the nation's military and economic success.

Those sentiments - in particular the need to build up a firm and determined spirit for the sake of the national good - are now being echoed by modern early rising associations, Dr Steger says.

Since October 2003, for example, teachers and students have had to stand every morning and sing the national anthem while the Japanese flag is raised in schools. "Beautiful Country Japan", the slogan on which the last Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe, ran his nationalistic reform agenda, later led to the establishment of the Council to Make Japan Beautiful. This institution set up many of the new early rising initiatives, such as the pre-school "early to bed, early to rise, breakfast" campaign and the asa expos. The campaign in support of the expos encourages participants to make the most of "the beauty of the nation" early in the morning.

Japanese people are also being encouraged to rise early to increase their contribution to the nation's economic welfare. Self-help guides and advice books encourage readers to cut back on their sleep to create new time in which to be more productive. One author argues that by reducing daily sleep by five hours, the reader could gain 70 full days a year in which to work towards intellectual qualifications or success in business and social life.

"Early rising is believed to help a person suppress their emotions, or physical desires and become more morally fortified," Dr Steger added. "That idea has become more potent with the revival in Japanese nationalism. It is no coincidence that nation-wide initiatives to encourage early-rising have regained momentum at a time when Japanese leaders have worked towards increasing love for the nation."

Worlds Of Sleep, edited by Lodewijk Brunt and Brigitte Steger, is published by Frank & Timme.

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