

Winds of change

Governor Yuriko Koike shares her vision for a smarter, more diverse and more international Tokyo. Interview by Tak Umezawa, words Ili Saarinen



SINCE HER ELECTION IN JULY this year, Yuriko Koike has been on a veritable roll. The first woman to hold Tokyo's top post, she has set out to clean up the Olympic-sized mess left by her scandal-felled predecessors while addressing issues from the controversial (and now stalled) relocation of Tsukiji fish market to the working habits of her more than 160,000 subordinates at the metropolitan government. We caught up with the energetic new governor to discuss some of the most pressing issues facing the capital – and where you should go to get really great yakitori.

EYES ON THE PRIZE
Our chat came only days after Tokyo moved up to third, trailing only London and New York, in the Mori Memorial Foundation's annual Global Power City Index. But despite this



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Tak has provided strategy, innovation and organisational advice to leading companies in Japan and the US. He has participated in government committees on Cool Japan strategy, and is a technology advisor to the Tokyo 2020 organising committee. Tak also runs the NEXTOKYO initiative that aims to make Tokyo the world's most attractive city.

achievement marking a long-awaited triumph for Tokyo, which had been stuck in fourth place ever since the index was first released in 2008, Koike makes it clear that her sights are set higher: 'Our goal has to be to reach the top. Many Japanese people don't realise how full of "treasures" Tokyo is. My job as governor is to find, refine, and tell the world about these treasures.'

Naming safety and food as two of Tokyo's greatest strengths, Koike is also eager to advance the concept of a 'smart city'. 'This relates to two themes: finance and the environment. Tokyo used to be a global financial centre on par with London and New York...and I would like to restore its status as the main financial hub in Asia. But this requires establishing an infrastructure: international schools, making it easier to employ housekeepers, creating one-stop business services in English – encouraging highly skilled professionals to work in Tokyo.'

And how does the former environment minister aim to make her old field 'smarter'? 'Tokyo is already on the cutting edge of environmental initiatives in countering climate change, but there's more we can do. For one, we are preparing to become the first municipality [in Japan] to issue green bonds.' Another climate-friendly Koike proposal suggests using Tokyo's existing facilities more efficiently: 'The city's museums and other unique venues could be used for receptions and the like more often. Closing the doors at 5pm is hardly ideal.'

Ever the cheerleader for our dear city, Koike – whose occasionally adventurous outfits have made her a minor fashion icon – had no qualms appearing in an anime costume for Halloween to plug Tokyo's subcultural charms. While stressing the power of pop culture, she would like to see it promoted more strategically and made more accessible to foreign travellers.

In fact, tourism is one of the soft-spoken governor's favourite themes, and when asked what Tokyo still lacks in its quest for world's best city status, her answer comes in the blink of an eye: 'The viewpoint of people from abroad. Take street signs: signs "in English" are actually in Japanese, only written with alphabetic characters. You can't even tell if they're pointing to a station, a street or what. In Libya, all signs are in Arabic only – due to nationalistic reasons – but in Japan, the signs have simply turned out like this, for no proper reason!' Her thoughts on the street sign dilemma – a seemingly minor issue on its own – provide a glimpse of Koike's cosmopolitan convictions.

MENTALITY MAKEOVER

During her first few months in office, the new governor has also proved a champion of shaking up outdated attitudes – particularly when it comes to Japan's notoriously rigid working culture. She believes in the power of technological advances in increasing remote work – something the 2012 Olympics helped London get a taste for, as she points out – and calls for a 'change in awareness' in improving women's work opportunities: 'The systems are already there...90 percent of women take maternity leave. On the other hand, the ratio of men taking paternity leave reached a new "high" this year – two percent! It's ridiculous. Even that 90 percent makes it seem like the system is working, but the problem is many women never come back to work – they quit.'

'To prevent this, we need to create an environment conducive to raising children, and daycare spots for everyone need to be secured, of course. But more fundamentally, a change in how we work is needed, which also ties into my advocacy of remote work. Simply doing things to make it look like you're doing something isn't going to cut it. A recent World Economic Forum report saw Japan fall to 111th in the Gender Gap index, despite all of the government's efforts. Why? Because other countries have done more. Various policies are being proposed, but the core issues have remained out of reach.'

That's where Tokyo can serve as an example, argues Koike: 'In global competitiveness rankings, the countries at the top have one thing in common. That's populations around five million – manageable, in other words. Strategies can be implemented very quickly in manageable environments. Japan is a nation of almost 130 million, with the third largest economy in the world, whereas Tokyo has one tenth of that population. We can lead in areas like social security – there are limits, of course, but success in Tokyo means that an initiative can then be taken up on the national level.'

Breaking out of old ways of thinking is all well and good, but sometimes more abrupt measures are needed – take the governor's recent order that mandates Tokyo government employees to turn off the lights and go home no later than 8pm sharp every evening. That decree hopefully helps the city's public servants stay fresh and focused, and might even give Yuriko Koike more time to entertain her many overseas guests: 'No matter what their rank or status, I always take them to Takechan, a yakitori joint in Ginza. Just a counter and a few tables, a charcoal grill and a great atmosphere. Eat there once and you'll never want to have yakitori anywhere else!'