MORE THAN WINNING: WHAT I LEARNED FROM LIFE IN NORWAY
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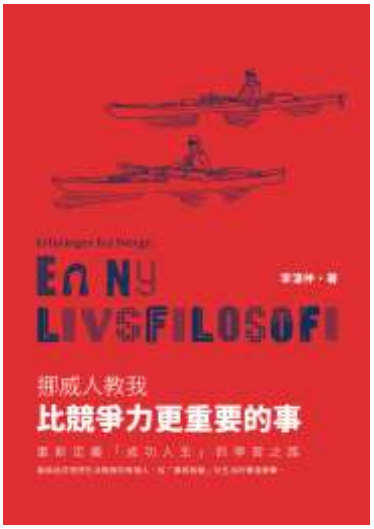

Six years of Norwegian life: the impressions and observations of a Taiwanese reporter and father

Over the last few years, the world has been gripped with enthusiasm for Scandinavian style in fashion, interior design and food, not to mention their unique outlooks on life. But while everyone knows about the Danes and their *hygge*, Finland's *sisu*, and Swedish *lagom*, the philosophy of life in Norway – the number one country on the UN Human Development Index for the last three years – remains relatively obscure.

When his wife was assigned a diplomatic post in Norway, Lee Hao-Chung migrated there with her – and quickly discovered that the pace of life was very different from the Pacific island he knew. With a reporter's keen eye for detail, he describes his initial struggles to integrate and his interactions with assorted representatives of Norwegian society, bringing these encounters vividly to life with a charming warmth and wit.

When the price of Norwegian paper soared in the twentieth century, the government subsidized the newspaper industry to guarantee diversity of opinion and uphold freedom of speech. They drew up a prison system that revolves around the principles of reeducation and rehabilitation. Norway is a leader in the Gender Inequality Index and Gender Development Index: there are women at the head of each of the seven major political parties, over forty percent of the board members at the country's hundred largest corporations are women, and fathers receive twelve weeks of fully-paid paternity. These are some of the facts Lee considers when he trains his focus on the broader picture of Norwegian life, in an attempt to define the characteristics that make this nation unique.

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organization *Up Media*. This is the seventh volume in his series of books on Norway; other titles include *Secrets of the Perfect Scandinavian Husband* and *Nora, If You Grow Up in Norway*.

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By Lee Hao-Chung
Translated by Roddy Flagg

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15. Nora and Anna

I never planned to live in Norway, but my time there was hugely rewarding – and of course the greatest reward was my two daughters, both born later in our stay. As they were both born in Norway we gave them both very Norwegian names: Nora for our eldest, and Anna for her sister.

Nora was named for the protagonist of *A Doll's House*, the best-known work of Norwegian playwright Henrik Johan Ibsen. This play has been credited with spurring the liberation of European women from traditional marriages and helping inspire the European women's rights movement. By bestowing this name on our daughter we hope she too will not be constrained by traditional female roles, but have the courage to be herself. Anna's name came from a tour of the Royal Palace. While I was walking through a corridor, a portrait of a Norwegian woman – dignified and firm of gaze – caught my eye. On enquiring I found this was Anna Georgine Rogstad, who fought for Norway's women to have the vote and then took the lead by becoming the country's first female parliamentarian. And so we named our second daughter Anna, for the same reasons we named our first Nora.

There are good reasons why Norway is known as one of the most feminist of nations. Rogstad was followed in 1981 by Norway's first female prime minister, Gro Harlem Brundtland, who served ten years in the post across three terms. Erna Solberg became the second female prime minister after parliamentary elections in 2013. The country is now accustomed to having a woman at the helm. At one point all seven main political parties were chaired by women. For many years women have occupied about half of all cabinet posts, and they usually hold at least one third of parliamentary seats.

Meanwhile the proportion of female board members at Norway's 125 leading firms has on a number of occasions passed 40%, the highest level in Europe. In the past Norway's career women have faced similar problems to their counterparts in other countries – a male-dominated culture and concealed sexism creating an invisible but very real barrier to promotion to senior levels. They are happy to be seeing more workplace success now the country has thrown off such prejudices.

A few years ago I realised feminism is so prevalent in Norway that even ideas of attractiveness have changed. Past ideas of beauty were usually all about delicate features, a thin waist, an ample bust. But when in 2013 a Norwegian celebrity website selected its sexiest women of the year, not one single model was chosen – unlike in previous years, when models had dominated the list. In their place: a professional golfer, a chef, a novelist, a bass guitarist. Laudably, none had been chosen merely for their looks. Admittedly the whole process of listing women like this remains more patriarchal than feminist, but at least this website is learning not to judge women on appearances alone.

The rise of feminism in Norway has naturally changed the way men and women interact. In particular, child-raising is no longer the sole province of the mother. Norway's fathers are entitled to 12 weeks of paternity leave at full pay (mothers get 37 weeks' maternity leave). Sweden's equality policies got off to a slightly earlier start than those in Norway, but according to a survey carried out by the Swedish Association of Graduates in Business Administration and Economics only 67% of Swedish fathers wanted to apply for paternity leave and stay at home with the kids. In Norway more than 80% said they would be willing to do so. This explains one of the first things I noticed on arriving in Norway: the number of men pushing baby buggies

around. Women can now get pregnant, give birth and take time off without worrying about the impact on their career prospects, and their husbands are willing to do half the child-raising and wipe up half the pee and poo.

And if unmarried, Norway's women no longer worry about their status as a single parent. In 2001 Norway's Crown Prince Haakon married single mother Mette-Marit. Haakon's older sister Märtha Louise struck a blow for female empowerment the following year when she gave up her royal title and opted to marry a little-known author. Today it is mostly women rather than men that advocate for cohabitation over getting married. The changes in relations between the sexes have gone far beyond those that Henrik Ibsen, a Norwegian feminist (even if this isn't a description he would have recognised), could have expected a century ago.

Another milestone for equality was reached in the fourth year we spent in Norway for my wife's diplomatic posting. In 2013 the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, long dominated by men, had more female ambassadors than male. At the ministry's annual gathering, men were no longer in the ascendency. Diplomacy can involve declarations of war, negotiating peace and hammering out deals – things men have often been thought to be naturally better at. And so women struggled to progress in the ministry. Indeed, foreign ministries are often even stronger bastions of manliness than defence ministries. In the past, diplomacy had been the preserve of men in well-pressed suits – but no more, said Espen Barth Eide, Norway's Minister for Foreign Affairs, at that annual gathering. Those scenes no longer exist, as the ministry no longer contains that glass ceiling which blocked the promotion of female employees.

But the problems once faced by Norway's female diplomats are replicated in embassies around the world. Careers are often interrupted by families, children must be uprooted to follow their mother to foreign postings – not something any mother is keen to do – and other halves may not be any more willing. Although equality is much more advanced in Norway than it is in East Asia, the idea that they might have to accompany their wives off to distant shores and spend their days minding the house remain alien to most Norwegian men. There can also be problems when host nations have different views on a woman's place. The trickiest problem faced by former Norwegian ambassador to Argentina, Berit Hessen, was not a sensitive diplomatic task handed down by her bosses – it was dealing with her local driver, who couldn't accept working for a woman and often argued with her.

After successive waves of feminism, a new generation of Norwegians see equality of the sexes as being as natural as sunlight, air and water. But whether it's men pushing baby buggies down the street or women flying off to serve as ambassadors, the real significance isn't just that men and women have swopped jobs – it's that this was the inevitable outcome of the pursuit of a nation free of sexual discrimination.

And yet it turns out Norway's feminists are not satisfied. Why not? A report from the Norwegian University of Science and Technology showed that despite Norway having had two female prime ministers, despite women making up half of the government and despite their increased status, Norway's women have less understanding of political affairs than men, and no small number of them seem uninterested in politics. Norway's women appear less interested in politics than even women in more patriarchal societies such as Columbia, Greece, Italy, Japan and Korea.

I did once notice that in local cafés in the early morning I would see men with their heads buried in a newspaper, catching up on national affairs, while beside them sat their harassed wives, tending to the children. The Norwegians themselves are surprised they are regarded as such an equal society, seeing as women have little to do with politics and have effectively handed power over to the men. Will this lack of vigilance mean Norway eventually becomes male-dominated again, drifting further away from the ideal of an equal society? This fear may be why feminist groups stress that men returning to the home is not in itself a symbol of equality – women must also get equal control in the workplace and in politics. Only then will women be free of the social norms of a traditionally male society.

Norwegian women seem to have successfully handed their babies over to their menfolk, but not yet to have realised they should go further and take political power in exchange. And so the country's feminists continue to work for sexual equality. As that report from the Norwegian University of Science and Technology on national sexual equality concluded, "we fear women's lack of interest in politics may prevent Norway from reaching a higher level of the equality." So although I may have been amazed at those demonstrations of equality I saw, the Norwegians themselves are less sure.

Some of my friends think I was being a bit of a selfish father in giving my daughters names inspired by feminism. Was I trying to delay the day they would leave me and fall into the arms of some other man? That represents very patriarchal thinking and was not my intention at all. It was only after my immersion in Norwegian culture that I came to realise how patriarchal the society I grew up in is. If I don't take the lead in rejecting that, what right do I have to hope my daughters grow up to be independent women? Norway's ideas of equality seem more advanced than ours, to have left us far behind. I hope Nora and Anna will do their best to catch up, because I have seen for myself that what lies ahead will help us further realise the value and significance of being a modern progressive.