

OBSERVATIONS ON JAPANESE CULTURE AND POLITICS

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I describe here several of the tourist spots that my students and I visited in Japan in 2000 and then make certain observations on Japanese culture and politics. This is a revised version of the speech delivered at Japan-America Society of Northwest Florida, 24 August 2000.

I accompanied six University of West Florida students on a study abroad program during the summer of 2000. We were attached to Tokyo Communication Arts College, commonly known as TCA. The students were put up at their respective dormitories. My wife and I were given a tiny 234 square feet apartment in the suburbs of Tokyo, near the Kiba underground station on the Tozai line. Japan is a rich country but its wealth is not reflected in the quality and size of its housing. The apartment made available to us had a tiny bathroom, a one-burner cooking stove, two small beds, and a table which served both as a dining and a study table. We were initially shocked at the smallness of the apartment, but we got adjusted to the compact space. This is a testimony to the ability of human beings to adjust. In the small apartment, we even accommodated a guest for a week, who slept on the kitchen floor.

Classes were held thrice a week on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays. The long weekends were designed to accommodate educational and cultural travel. I am pleased to say that my students made full use of the weekends to study culture, focused largely on the pub and night-club culture. The Japanese “salarymen” frequent the pubs (known as *Izakayas*) after a long working day. American students found the pubs a good place to meet Japanese men and women in a relaxed environment.

I shall give a quick review of the following topics:

- 1 The tourist spots that we visited**
- 2 Observations on Japanese culture**
- 3 Observations on Japanese elections and democracy**

Kamakura. The Daibatsu or the Great Buddha in Kamakura moved me greatly. This immense bronze statue of seated Buddha, 11 meters or about 35' high, impacted my whole being. The Great Buddha was built in early 1200's during the Yoritomo Minamoto period. The Buddha statue once had a roof over it; a tidal wave washed it away 500 years ago. The Buddha continues to sit under the open skies with hills as a backdrop. He sits on a stone pedestal, a broad shouldered figure in deep meditation, with his head slightly bowed forward, and his robes streaked green by centuries of sun, rain and the wind.

Nijo-Jo. The Nijo-Jo palace in Kyoto was built in the early 1600s as a second residence for the Shogun. The palace took 23 years to complete. Each room in the palace is lavishly decorated with screen paintings by leading artists of the day belonging to the Kano school. Its many rooms were finished in various styles. There was no furniture. The Shogun and his attendants sat on the floor with their legs folded in the Japanese style. The floors were squeaking "nightingale" floors that made it difficult for intruders to enter unannounced. The palace rooms were featured in the popular Hollywood film, *Shogun*.

Kyoto Streets. We cruised the narrow streets of Kyoto one afternoon. To our pleasant surprise, we came across fully costumed Geisha girls. The excited men in our party managed to get close to the girls and had their pictures taken with them. Later we learned that the Geisha girls were not authentic; they were in fact college students on lark from school for a day, dressed in rented Geisha kimonos.

Kiyomizu Temple. Built on a hillside in the style of an Indian shrine, the Kiyomizu temple houses the Buddha and the Bodhisattavas. The Bodhisattava is a liberated being who in his great compassion gives up Heavenly abode and takes up residence among human beings to alleviate their suffering. The chief Deity in this temple can be seen only once in 33 years. The year 2,000 was such a year. We were blessed with good Karma to have viewed the presiding Deity.

Today-ji at Nara. For many people the old capital town of Nara is

synonymous with Todai-ji, the great Buddhist temple built in 752 A.D. Nara was once the center of Buddhist art and learning in Japan. Todai-ji's main hall is the largest wooden building in the world.

Todai-ji houses Japan's largest Daibatsu, the Great Buddha. A 15-meter or 50' high Buddha is seated on a lotus throne. It represents the Cosmic Buddha, presiding over all levels of the universe. The religious spirit that created this immense work of art moved us greatly. One of the students in the party commented, "I am not a very religious person. I have seen many grand cathedrals and churches. The religious fervor of the people who created this magnificent monument has touched me and moved me beyond measure."

In the great hall of the Todai-ji temple, there is a wooden pillar in the rear of the building. At the bottom of this wooden pillar is a hole equal to the size of Buddha's nostril in the bronze statue above. I believe the hole is only 18" long and 12" wide. A person who can wiggle through this narrow hole is a candidate for Buddhist Heaven. I tried to go through the tight hole, but lost my nerve. Couple of my students were braver and thinner than I was and they made it through the hole, thus assuring their place in heavens above.

Hiroshima. On August 6, 1945, 140,000 lives were extinguished instantaneously in Hiroshima because of the dropping on it of the atomic bomb. Hiroshima generated emotions of deep sadness for us. Everyone was somber. The bomb was dropped for the stated reason of shortening the War. If this explanation is accepted, what was the need for a second bomb that fell three days later on Aug 9 on Nagasaki? The first bomb had made the point clear about America's supremacy in the conflict.

OBSERVATIONS ON JAPANESE CULTURE

I learned many things about Japan. Japan is a unique island civilization. It is separated from the Asian mainland by a large body of water. Korea, the closest neighbor, is 100 miles away. China is 500 miles from Japan. These distances, large in ancient times, helped create a unique and distinctive Japanese civilization. Japan may be compared with England in this respect. England is located only 21 miles away from France, the distance between Dover in England and Calais in France. Japan is thus more isolated than is

England. Yet, Japan borrowed a great deal from the Asian mainland.

Japan is said to be a cultural daughter of China. One popular stereotype is that the Japanese have been nothing more than borrowers and imitators. The truth is quite the contrary. Japan has developed in many independent ways. Note the following unique Japanese features:

- the thick Tatami covered floors**
- the sliding paper paneled walls**
- the wall recesses for art objects**
- the charcoal burning hibachis for heat**
- the deep bath tubs for relaxation and purification**
- the small manicured rock gardens which are copied the world over**
- the Zen method of meditation**
- distinctive cuisine and esthetic presentation**
- Kabuki and Noh Drama Theater**
- a sense of beauty and attention to detail unparalleled anywhere**

Japanese language is like no other language. Even though Japan has borrowed its writing method of using characters from the Chinese, the Japanese language is as different from the Chinese as English is from Greek. Because Japanese is a unique language, the Japanese students face many problems in learning a foreign language, especially the English. Even University students who have studied English for many years lack fluency in spoken English. If you ask for directions in English at a college campus, the Japanese students begin to suck air in puzzlement.

Because of English language deficiency, Japan is falling behind in the field of computer software development and information technology. India is ahead of Japan in these fields even though India is an underdeveloped country. One of the reasons for the Indian advance is the widespread use of the English language in India.

IMPLICATIONS OF JAPANESE UNIQUENESS. Japan's geographic distance from the rest of Asia and its linguistic uniqueness have made the Japanese people highly self-conscious. The Japanese believe that they are like

no other people. This awareness of uniqueness on the part of the Japanese has led to feelings of both inferiority and superiority toward non-Japanese. I was told that Japanese exhibit feelings of superiority toward other Asians. Simultaneously, they exhibit feelings of inferiority toward the Westerners. This is a curious phenomenon.

A TRUE NATION-STATE. Japanese insularity from the rest of Asia has helped it become a true nation state. A nation state is both a nation and a state. The word 'nation' emphasizes the idea of unity and homogeneity among the people of a country. Japanese unity and homogeneity is evident in its numerous facets. For example, a common language is spoken in the several thousand islands that make up Japan. The Japanese people belong to a single ethnic and racial stock. The aboriginal people called the Ainu are different racially. They inhabit the northern island of Hokkaido and their number is very small.

Religion does not divide the people in Japan. Although three religions—Shintoism, Buddhism and Christianity—are found in Japan, there is little religious violence. Different religions co-exist and co-mingle. Buddhist temples and Shinto Shrines may occupy the same compound. A Christian wedding is followed by a Shinto ceremony. Funerals are by Buddhist rites.

CONFORMITY IN JAPAN. A sense of conformism and group loyalty is a dominant feature of the Japanese culture. The homogeneity of the Japanese people may contribute to this feature. To get ahead you have to get along. "The nail that sticks out gets pounded down," is repeated often in Japan. The group defines the individual. The individual is important only in as much as he is a part of the group. The cultural trait of groupism is evident in many facets of life: business leaders are similarly dressed in blue suits and ties; school children wear identical uniforms.

The Japanese trait of group conformity defines even the top rungs of the political leadership in the country. Japanese Prime ministers are said to be team players; they are not strong leaders in their own person. It is hard to find in the Japanese Prime Ministers the equivalent of a Winston Churchill, a John F. Kennedy or an Indira Gandhi. Japanese Prime ministers rise to their position because of their amicability and in their skills at consensus building. Seldom do they rise to their

position because of the strength of their personality or the force of their ideas.

A long term student of Japanese politics, Karel Wolferen, observes as follows:

The Japanese prime minister has less real power than any head of government in the Western world, or in most countries of Asia. He also has considerably less power than he is implicitly credited with by most casual foreign observers. . . .

Suzuki Zenko had polished the Japanese skills of side-stepping decisions to an extent unprecedented among post-war prime ministers. In the years when Tanaka was prime minister, a then invisible Suzuki had helped keep order within the ranks of the LDP, thus giving Tanaka a reason for picking him as prime minister. . .

His elevation to prime minister was totally unexpected, because few people had ever noticed him before. What was apparent soon enough, however, was that he had no understanding whatsoever of economic or diplomatic affairs. Suzuki's paramount interest was never to incur anyone's wrath, and the way to ensure this was to do absolutely nothing.

--see Karel Wolferen, *Enigma of Japanese Power*, 1989.

The Japanese Prime ministers are rotated out of office with great frequency. Between 1989 and 2000, 9 different Prime ministers served the nation. Prime ministers change because of change in factional balance within the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP).

JAPANESE ELECTIONS

I was fortunate to have witnessed the election of 2000 to the Lower House of the Japanese Diet, the House of Representatives. Four hundred and eighty seats were filled on June 25 by a two tier election method: a combination of single seat method and the method called "proportional representation."

Elections in Japan are much different from those in the United States.

Election campaigns are short lasting only 3 to 4 weeks.

Election dates are not fixed. Within the four-year cycle of the life of the parliament, elections may be held at any time.

Two separate election methods are employed: 300 seats are filled by the American style single member district election method. The remaining 180 seats are filled by the Proportional Representation (PR) method. Under the PR method, people vote for parties, not individual candidates. Seats are allocated to different parties in proportion to the percentage of the vote each party receives.

The party that receives majority of the seats in the parliament selects the Prime Minister (PM). If no single party commands a majority of seats, a coalition government among several parties is formed. The government headed by PM Yoshiro Mori in 2000 was a coalition government of three parties: the LDP, the New Komeito and the Hoshuto.

Japan has only two elections, one to each of the two houses of the national parliament. In contrast, America has many national and state level elections.

Because of the short duration of election campaigns, Japanese political parties spend less money in campaigning than do parties in the United States. Even so, Japanese parties raise millions of dollars for their war chests.

The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) headed by Yoshiro Mori was returned to power in June 2000 although with a reduced margin of victory. The LDP got 233 seats, down from 270 seats in the previous election, a reduction of 37 seats. Because the LDP does not have a clear majority in the HR (233 seats out of a total of 480), it has joined hands with New Komeito(31 seats) and Hoshuto (7 seats) to form a coalition government.

Despite setbacks, the LDP continues to be the dominant party in Japan. The LDP has governed Japan for 42 out of last 45 years. Several reasons can be attributed for the success of the LDP.

The opposition is divided among many diverse groups and factions. The combined popular vote for the opposition parties exceeds 50 percent. Because the opposition parties compete against each other, their total share of the parliamentary seats falls below 50 percent.

The LDP is a party of patronage. It patronizes construction companies through lucrative building contracts. Some 550,000 construction companies employ over 6 million construction workers, which constitutes a large reservoir of support for the LDP.

The LDP is the party of success. Under LDP's leadership, Japan has emerged as the leading economic power in the globe. The LDP has built a strong sense of legitimacy among the population.

DEMOCRACY IN JAPAN

Democracy in Japan is a foreign import. It is "a gift from above." The Constitution was drafted under the direction of General Douglas MacArthur, the Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers. The Japanese Constitution is commonly referred to as the MacArthur Constitution.

Japan was ruled by authoritarian Shoguns between 1603 and 1868. The 15-year old Meiji Emperor was restored to power in 1868. An authoritarian constitution was adopted in 1889. The emperor's position was "sacred and inviolable." The emperor's subjects could not use his personal name. When he traveled in public, the citizens could not look at him and kept their heads lowered.

Japan is a great success story both in building economy and democracy. From being 60 percent destroyed during the War, it now is a leading economic power in the globe. The economic success has legitimized the democratic regime.

Japan is a successful democracy by all measures. Election results rather than coups bring about change in leadership. Riots and rebellions have been few and civil liberties are protected. The press is free and parties compete vigorously to gain power.

Japan needs to reach an accommodation with its Asian neighbors, China and Korea in particular. Japan's wartime occupation of these and other Southeast Asian countries was ruthless. These countries want an apology and an acknowledgment from Japan for the suffering it caused on the conquered people. Iris Chang's book, *The Rape of Nanking*, has rekindled the controversy about Japanese wartime behavior.

Japan needs to do more in helping to build less developed countries in Asia. This obligation comes along with being an economic superpower. Japan is a great country and the Japanese are compassionate people. Japan will certainly rise to meet its obligations and to play a constructive role in the world.

Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you very much for your attention. I will be happy to answer any questions.