I describe here several of the tourist areas that my students and I visited in Japan in 2000 and then make certain observations on Japanese culture and politics. The description is based on the text of a speech delivered by the author 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 small table which served both for dining and study. 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; he slept in a sleeping bag 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 Japanese 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 along 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-up pictures with the girls. 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.

Todai-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. The Temple 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. He 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 young 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.”

A wooden pillar stands in the rear of the building of Todai-Ji temple. At the bottom of this wooden pillar is a hole equal to the size of Buddha’s nostril in the 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. A couple of my female students were thinner and braver; they made it through the narrow hole, thus reserving their place in heavenly regions above.

Hiroshima. On August 6, 1945, 140,000 lives were extinguished instantaneously in Hiroshima because of the dropping on it of an 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?

OBSERVATIONS ON JAPANESE CULTURE

I learned many things about Japan--a unique island civilization. Japan is separated from the Asian mainland by a relatively narrow 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 and Calais). 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
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 and cannot properly answer.

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. Country’s geographic distance from the rest of Asia and its linguistic uniqueness has made the Japanese people highly self-conscious. The Japanese believe that they are like no other people. This awareness of uniqueness 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. 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; school children wear identical uniforms; people speak a common language.

The Japanese trait of group conformity defines even the top rungs of the political leadership. 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. . .
Suzuki’s 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.


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 or the LDP is the major conservative party of Japan. It is one of the most consistently successful parties in the country. It has been in power since 1955 with only brief periods when it was out of office. Several reasons can be attributed for the success of the LDP.

The opposition is divided among several 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 the LDP 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 stair at him; they kept their heads lowered.

Japan is a success story both as a great economic power and as a democracy. Japan was 60 percent destroyed during the War. It has rebuilt itself. The economic success has legitimized the democratic regime.

Japan’s democratic institutions work well. Election results rather than coups bring about change in leadership. Civil liberties are protected. Riots and rebellions have been few. 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 lands was ruthless. These countries want an apology from Japan. Iris Chang’s book, *The Rape of Nanking*, has rekindled the controversy about Japanese wartime behavior.

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