

## **JAPANESE CULTURE AND POLITICS—SOME OBSERVATIONS**

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Note: Important Japanese tourist attractions are described towards the end.

Six UWF students and I visited Japan for a six-week period in 2000. We were hosted by the Tokyo Communication Arts College (TCA), one of the colleges in the Jikei Group of Professional Colleges. I shall give a quick review of the following topics:

- 1 Observations on Japanese culture and society
- 2 Observations on Japanese elections and democracy
- 3 A Brief Description of several tourist attractions

The University of West Florida (UWF) has had a strong relationship with the Jikei group of colleges, headed by the internationally oriented philanthropist, Mr. Kunihiko Ukefune. Japanese students come to UWF for English language classes. Florida students travel in the other direction during the summer months. I was the faculty guide in summer, 2000.

See: <http://en.jikeigroup.net/about/>

The six students were put up in Japanese style crowded dormitories in Tokyo. 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 tiny apartment made available to us had a narrow bathroom, a one-burner cooking stove, two small beds, and a small table which served both for dining and study. Initially, we were shocked at the smallness of the living space, but we got adjusted within a week or so. This is a testimony to the ability of human beings to adjust. We even accommodated a guest for a week, who slept on the kitchen floor in a sleeping bag.

The 6-American students studied the Japanese political system and society under my tutorship. They also enrolled in a Japanese language class. Classes were held thrice a week on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays. The long weekend was designed to facilitate cultural travel. I am pleased to say that my students made full use of the weekends to study Japanese culture, focusing greatly on the pub and night-club culture. After a long and hard working day, the Japanese *salarymen* and women often frequent the pubs (known as *Izakayas*). American students found the pubs a good place to meet Japanese men and women in a friendly atmosphere.

### **OBSERVATIONS ON JAPANESE CULTURE**

I learned many things about Japan--a unique island civilization. Japan is separated from the Asian mainland by a narrow body of water. Korea, the closest neighbor, is 100 miles away, and China 500 miles away. These distances, large in ancient times, helped create in Japan a unique and distinctive civilization. Japan may be compared with England in this respect. England is

only 21 miles away from France (the distance between Dover and Calais). Japan is thus farther from the mainland than is England. This helped Japan develop more of a distinctive culture.

One popular stereotype is that the Japan is nothing more than a borrower and an imitator. Indeed, Japan borrowed a great deal from the Asian mainland. Some people go far, and say that Japan is a cultural daughter of China. This is far-fetched. Japan has developed in many distinctive 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
- a distinctive cuisine with esthetic presentation
- Kabuki and Noh Drama Theater
- the unique Japanese language
- a heightened appreciation for beauty in art and nature
- an attention to detail unparalleled anywhere else

Language. Japanese language is like no other language. Even though Japan borrowed its writing method from the Chinese, yet 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. While visiting the University of Tokyo, I discovered that if you asked a college student on campus for directions to an office, he/she would begin to suck air in puzzlement and could not properly answer.

Interestingly, India outpaces Japan in computer software technology, even when Japan is technologically very advanced. A reason for this measure is the widespread use of the English language in India. English and the Indian languages are part of the same family, the Indo-European language family. Indian and European languages are thus related. Japanese is not.

FEELINGS OF SUPERIORITY. Japan's geographic distance from the Asian mainland and its linguistic uniqueness has made the Japanese highly self-conscious. The Japanese believe that they are like no other race. This sense of uniqueness has led to feelings of superiority as a culture and as a nation. With the rapid rise of China and South Korea, this attitude of superiority is likely to dissipate.

JAPAN AS A TRUE NATION-STATE. Japan's insularity from the rest of Asia makes Japan a true nation state. A nation state is both a nation and a state. The word nation emphasizes the idea of homogeneity among the people of a country. Japanese homogeneity is evident in its numerous facets. Japan's territory includes hundreds of islands, some large, many small. All are distant from the mainland. Throughout, the common Japanese language is spoken (unlike for example in India where a dozen or more language are current). Also, the Japanese people belong to a single ethnic and racial stock. The aboriginal people called the Ainu are different racially.

But their numbers are miniscule. The Ainu inhabit the northern island of Hokkaido.

Unlike some other Asian countries, the Japanese are not divided by religion. Japan is predominantly Buddhist and Shinto in religion. Christianity has made inroads since American occupation of Japan after WWII. Different religions co-exist and co-mingle in Japan. Buddhist temples and Shinto Shrines may occupy the same compound. A Christian-style wedding is followed by a Shinto ceremony. Funerals are by Buddhist rites.

A SENSE OF CONFORMITY. Conformity and group loyalty are said to be the dominant features of the Japanese culture. To get ahead you have to get along. The nail that sticks out gets pounded down. The individual is important only in as much as he/she is a part of the group. This cultural trait of uniformity and groupiness is evident in many facets of life in Japan: business leaders are similarly dressed in blue suits; school children wear identical uniforms; people work for the same company throughout their lives.

## **JAPANESE POLITICS AND DEMOCRACY**

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 the top position because of their amiability and because they are team players. Seldom do they rise to their position because of the strength of their personality or the force of their intellect.

Karel Wolferen, a long-term student of Japan, describes it 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 were to do absolutely nothing. --see Karel Wolferen, *Enigma of Japanese Power*, 1989.

The Japanese Prime ministers are rotated out of office with great frequency. For example, 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).

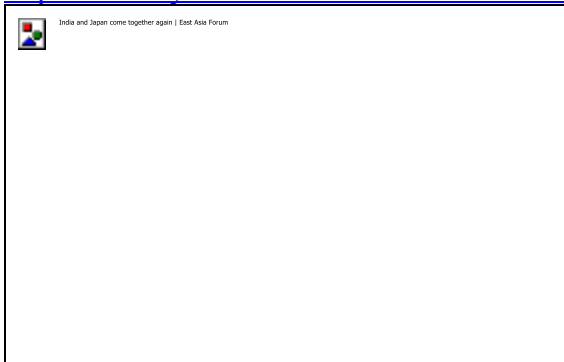


But things seem to be different in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Shinzo Abe, the PM 2012-2020, was by all accounts a very strong leader. Abe resigned in 2020 due to a cancer malady.

PM Abe with Pres Barack Obama in Tokyo, 2014

PM Abe visited India in 2016 for stronger ties.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FabrNTn5Rzg>



## JAPANESE ELECTIONS

I was fortunate to witness elections to the Japanese House of Representatives in 2000. Four hundred and eighty seats are filled by a two tier election method: a combination of single seat method and the method known as “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, a coalition government is formed. For example, 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 campaigns, elections cost less in Japan than 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 world. It has been in power since 1955, with only brief out-of-power periods. 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 sometimes exceeds 50 percent. Because the opposition parties compete against each other, their total share of the parliamentary seats usually 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 (2000).

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.

## **SUCCESS OF DEMOCRACY IN JAPAN**

Democracy in Japan is a foreign import. It is said to be “a gift from above.” The Constitution was drafted under the direction of Douglas MacArthur, the Supreme Allied Commander. The Japanese Constitution is 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 stare or ogle at him; they kept their heads lowered.

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

Japan’s democratic institutions are strongly established and work well. Election results provide legitimacy. Civil liberties are protected. Riots and rebellions have been few. The press is free and parties compete vigorously for power.

Japan is thus a great success story.

## **SOME JAPANESE TOURIST ATTRACTIONS**

Japan is one of the most popular travel destinations in the world. Numerous temples and shrines dot the country. Modern architecture comes along with the ancient temples—thus a fascinating panorama.

My students and I visited a number of Japanese landmarks, including the following.

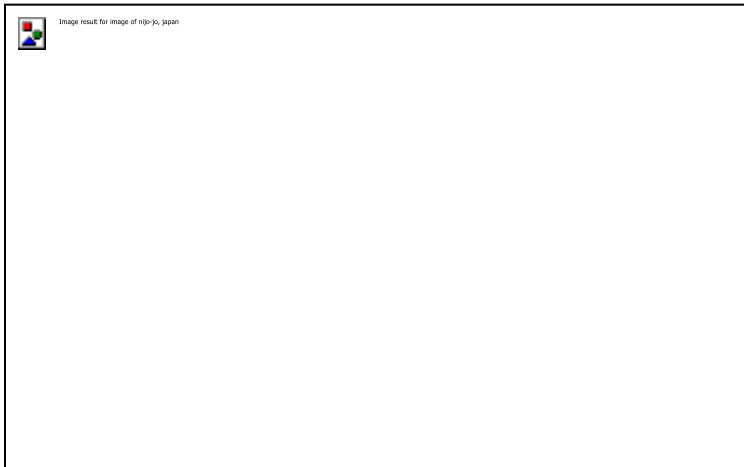


### The Great Buddha

The Daibutsu or the Great Buddha in Kamakura is a world class attraction. 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 some 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.

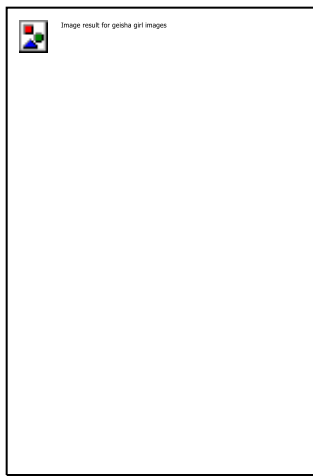


### Nijo-Jo

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. There was no furniture.

The Shogun's attendants sat on the floor with their legs folded in the Japanese style.

The palace 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*, and may be viewed on Youtube here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zAqFgtz0vU> The rock gardens shown in the picture are spectacular.

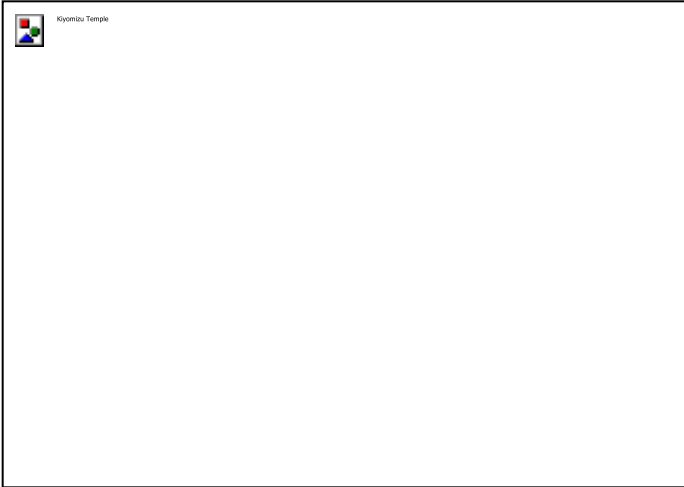


### Kyoto Streets

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, who were friendly and very accommodating. 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 Bodhisattva. It is said that the Bodhisattva gives up Heavenly abode and takes up residence here 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



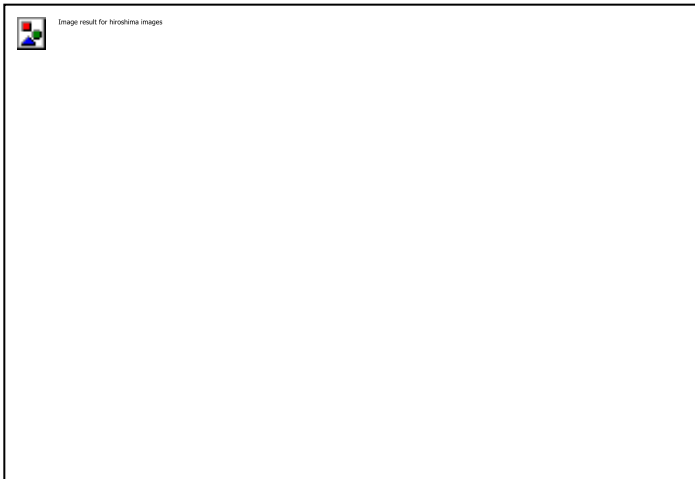
For many people the old capital town of Nara is synonymous with Todai-ji, the great Buddhist temple built in 752 A.D. Nara was once the center of Buddhist art and learning in Japan. The Temple is the largest wooden building in the world.

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 students in my 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



The 6<sup>th</sup> of August in 1945 is a day of sorrow in Japan. Some 140,000 lives were extinguished instantaneously by an American atomic bomb that fell on Hiroshima. The utter devastation at the Hiroshima site generated deep emotions for my students and me—sadness. We walked around with heads bowed, somber and gloomy.

The bomb was dropped for the stated reason that it would shorten 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?

After a six-week stay in Japan, we said good bye to our hosts with heavy hearts.