

Abroad in Japan - Observations in The Land of The Rising Sun

Introduction:

I arrived in Japan eager to learn about the culture and country, and admittedly undereducated on either subject. I'd never been to a place with such a language gap. I myself know little Japanese, and the proficiency of English in Japan is comparable to Americans' general surface-level Spanish proficiency. Learning to navigate day-to-day traveling—content with what few Japanese words I could pick up and what English words strangers knew—was a real challenge. I think the initial shock of it all—being unable to read signs and unable to understand what employees at various establishments said—made for a personally very novel experience. Additionally, I left the country having learned to appreciate collectivism and the Japanese way of doing things.

Initial Observations

On my first full day in Tokyo, and by extension the country, I walked for a while by myself around the city. No one told me the country drives on the left side of the road. I was intrigued to discover that that left-leaning bias extends to a lot of Japanese life. On sidewalks, I noticed a lot of folks walking on the left and passing on the right—a complete inversion of what I'm used to in the U.S. Books and menus, too, are read with what would be our “front page” as their back page. This small observation clued me into a right-leaning bias I didn't even know I had. Small things like this put my own Western culture into perspective. I was intrigued to learn that body language—something I thought was universal—is different in Japan. Additional gestures not commonly found in the West were easy to pick up—things like bowing or crossing one's arms into an X, for example. What was harder to internalize were the gestures not found in Japanese life—things like winking or pointing to one's chest to indicate oneself, gestures that are ubiquitous in the West. I felt intimidated to realize that gestures I make without thinking can confuse the Japanese, or even mean something entirely different. It highlights a mountainous communication and thought barrier that exists between different cultures.

Different Ways of Thinkings

To that end, the Japanese way of thinking was something I was eager to learn more about. Our program took part in a cross-cultural leadership development conference with students from Nagoya University. During the conference, exploring

ideas unique to the Japanese way of thinking and conducting business was a major talking point. In American culture, it is common to lay everything out at team meetings—to speak of subjects for the first and last time. In Japanese business culture, there exists a complicated interpersonal process of peer-to-peer consensus gathering prior to meetings. This can be jarring in either direction: Americans operating in Japanese culture, or vice versa. For Americans, the Japanese way of doing things can create the feeling of people “going behind your back.” For the Japanese, the American way of conducting everything out in the open can feel needless, gung-ho, and exclusionary.

In science, there's a concept of group-averaging. If you ask 1,000 people to independently guess the number of jelly beans in a jar, no one is particularly likely to be right—but the average across the group is likely to be very close. However, when people guess the average publicly, sharing their opinions openly, biases occur which skew the average of their guess wildly in either direction. This sort of “groupthink” can be very deleterious in team dynamics, yet it is something the American system of teamwork routinely runs into. The efficacy of a group's decision-making becomes compromised by the social drive to agree with one another. It is my opinion that the Japanese method of independent consensus gathering is far more effective at reducing social bias in decision-making, producing better outcomes. The drawback is that this method is more time-intensive. Yet, it is easy for me to imagine that this method of considering each and every stakeholder's opinion and concerns on an individual basis is almost certainly behind some of the great innovations in Japanese society.

Detail-Oriented Consideration of Others

Japan is a highly efficient country. A megatropolis like Tokyo has the flow of its 41 million residents down to a science. There seems to be an optimal way of doing everything—where to stand and queue, which direction to walk, where to pay for things, and where to seek help. Metro cars have varying lengths of ceiling grips for people's varying heights—something you rarely see in the West. Similarly, metro cars have special places for the elderly, disabled, and even entire cars dedicated only for women who want to avoid male strangers. Walking around cities in Japan, you see how the sidewalks all have sensory flooring for blind pedestrians. Crosswalks make noise for the deaf. The windows on buildings through which firefighters gain access to burning buildings are marked. Elevators announce when doors open and close. Stores offer umbrella bags and wet-umbrella racks by their entrances to avoid creating indoor puddles. Bathrooms commonly have mobility bars surrounding toilets and urinals for the elderly and disabled. These are just a few examples of a careful pattern toward inclusivity and consideration—one which is rarely seen in the West to such a widespread degree.

Collectivism

In addition to consensus building, another element of Japanese society that really stuck with me is collectivism. Having grown up in an individualist society where collectivism is often talked down upon, I had unexamined prejudicial opinions on the topic. I saw it as an affront to the individual—to one's ability to choose their own path. I come back from Japan with a very different view. I see now that collectivism preserves the same thing individualism does: autonomy. The difference lies in the consideration of others. The Japanese will wait to cross the street, rarely jaywalking, even when no cars are around. As our guide, Stephen, said, one reason for doing so is because "if a child is watching," you're modeling dangerous behavior. There is perhaps no action more individualistic than jaywalking, which to the American is a harmless, self-centered action. To the Japanese, it carries the risk of harming others unintentionally—of risking life and well-being through the principle of universalization. Waiting, then, preserves the autonomy and safety of others beyond yourself. Individualism, as a concept, fails to consider the other as linked to the self. Collectivism understands that these things are inextricably connected—the well-being of your children and your neighbor's children is tied to your own.

Japanese societal respect for elders is clearly grounded in collectivism and the preservation and well-being of everyone. The elderly are, as Americans know too well, a very vulnerable group. They systemically risk loneliness, depression, inactivity, neglect, and abuse—while at the same time grappling with deteriorating health. Japanese reverence for the elderly seeks to include this demographic in day-to-day life as much as possible, aiming to make this group feel heard and relevant in an ever-changing world. It empowers the elderly to stay active, involved, and included in society in a way from which the U.S. could learn. Certainly, this principle is grounded in collectivism. To me, this highlights a shortsighted quality of individualism—we all will grow old (if we're lucky), and we all would like to be taken care of in old age. So why don't we make an inclusive and empowering society for the elderly today? In this example, individualism directly fails to be self-preserving, while collectivism, through its understanding of how everyone in a community is tied together, succeeds.

Nationalism

One potentially negative consequence of collectivism, in our modern world, is nationalism. Japanese nationalism is something I was repeatedly confronted with. In museums and memorials, the culpability of Japanese imperialism is something glossed over. Indeed, it seems that the educational and political systems in Japan leave little room for acknowledging any form of fault in the country's atrocities during the Second World War. This lends the country a sort of historical amnesia and impedes honest

reflection on the past. This is not a purely Japanese problem. The U.S. must grapple with its own atrocities and senseless wars—yet has largely failed to do so. So then, Japan functions as something of a mirror to the West. The consequence of never fully abating nationalism seems to be an exclusivity the Japanese continue to hold into the modern day. I encountered restaurants and businesses that refused foreigners. I read that, with the influx of tourism, the number of establishments that segregate based on nationality is fewer than before—but they are clearly still present. One thing the U.S. does well, in my opinion, is inclusivity. Although our country has a long way to go before true equality is established, nearly all U.S. businesses serve everyone regardless of background. Similarly, many parts of the U.S. celebrate the country's diversity. By contrast—to risk over-generalizing—I observed that the Japanese prefer to celebrate their own homogeneity and seem to look inward for cultural resonance. This is neither good nor bad. It is something that struck me, though.

New Perspectives Back Home

As a foreigner not knowing any Japanese, I found myself anxious many times in Japan. On multiple occasions, I worried I was being watched and spoken about in words I didn't understand. It felt exhausting and intimidating at times to navigate a world with so little context. I realized, at some point, that this experience is likely highly analogous to the sizable, yet often excluded, population in North Carolina that only speaks Spanish. While volunteering in the Open Door Clinic, numerous times I've had patients who only speak Spanish tell me how anxious going to the clinic made them. I had always heard this, knowing that the language barrier didn't help things—but I instead focused on how some people are just scared of doctors. It's common for a certain subsection of the population to have "clinic anxiety". As I return home, I suddenly have a lot more sympathy for these patients. I can more clearly imagine how scary it must be to walk into a clinic, worried about real medical problems, while at the same time not knowing what people are saying to and about you. The anxiety is completely deserved. I've noticed that, as my medical Spanish has improved, the anxiety of my patients has gone down overall. My Spanish, however, isn't good by any means. When patients speak back to me—I understand *nada*. That must be a highly discouraging experience for them. This coming semester, I've decided to take a Spanish class at NC State to improve my interactions with these patients. Japan helped me to see the value in this decision. I hope that, as I move toward pursuing a career in health care, learning Spanish will pay dividends in terms of the quality of my patient care. I'm extremely grateful that I got to go on this trip—not least because it has opened my eyes to a stark reality many people around the world face daily.

Closing Thoughts

I want to acknowledge that in this reflection, I have spoken in broad generalizations. Of course, no country is a monolith. It's plain to see that in a country like Japan, there is much in the way of diverse thinking and opinion on all things spoken about above. Similarly, my observations were made over the course of two weeks. I get the sense that, in that time, I merely have scratched the surface of a culture that runs deep. All said, my two weeks in Japan were intensely memorable and insightful. Of all the places I've traveled to, few have made me reflect more on society and the function of the self as Japan has. It has challenged me to reconsider social responsibility and showed me the value of self-sacrifice for the good of the whole. I hope one day to return to the country. Hopefully, I'll know a bit more Japanese on my second go-around. I found the Japanese people who spoke English to be intensely nice and friendly. I trust that, if it weren't for the language barrier, most people would be so. If and when I return, I hope to foster more connections with locals that may offer deeper insight into the country, the culture, and the Japanese way of thinking.