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THE JAPAN THAT I MET

Mindy Holmes

"It was the best of times. It was the worst of times." This quote from Charles Dickens' "A Tale of Two Cities" is a very accurate description of how I felt during my time in Japan. There was so much to experience, but personal aspects tended to create an uneasy atmosphere during various times of my visit. Attempting to place my experiences in an organized, written form has been a challenge from which I have learned a great deal. By looking from today's perspective, studying my journals and letters, and using factual information, an overview of Japan and studying abroad has been created that will enable one to better understand the Japan that I met.

I should have known that my trip would be eventful when my flight was cancelled and I had to wait four more days before I could leave the country. Although I had a severe ear infection and benefited from the extra time, preparing to leave my loved ones again was difficult. Once in Osaka, I waited for one hour as my bags were the last to be placed on the luggage carousel. I was frustrated since my thoughts were of lost luggage and I was so far from home. I felt better when I was greeted by a staff member from school.

Kansai Gaidai is a four-year university that specializes in foreign language studies. Their name is also well known in circles of foreign students studying in Japan. Japanese universities are interesting when compared to U.S. schools.

Physically, the campus is contained within a large fence. At certain points, there are openings and guards. The facilities have much shorter hours than their U.S. counterparts. The library was open from 9 AM to 5 PM during the week and for only a few hours on Saturday. Classes are conducted in a lecture style with most students sleeping while the professor reads notes. Many lecturers have only a B.A., but more are getting their graduate degrees. College is seen as a period of fun more than work time. Once in a college, graduation is almost a given. Students will get jobs based on the college from which they are graduated with little emphasis on grades since companies train their employees in the ways of the particular firm.

Students start preparing for college exams in high school. Each college has a different test, so a particular course of study is pursued. Once hired by the company, the new employee has a new class. Pay is based on the number of years with the company, and one is trained in the ways of the company with those who entered at the same time. The concept that Japanese companies are so wonderful is not quite the truth. Only 30 percent of the population are employed with job security, great benefits, and Japanese management. The others occupy many types of jobs, such as small store owners and parts manufacturers, to name two. The small shops are in danger since the large department and grocery stores are growing in popularity. In fact, Toys R Us is a pioneer in a sense that

the "Big Store Law" was changed to allow a large store in a certain area.

The parts-related employees are also in a risky atmosphere. They work in very poor conditions with sub-subsistence wages. The large companies use the small factories as a source of cheap labor. The goods are kept until the larger companies need them. When times get rough, the little people are hit first. This has a large effect on women. Women make up 80 percent of the part-time workers. They do piece work for the small manufacturers or help out in the office and receive very low wages with no benefits. More women need jobs since living costs are so high. Women who have attended college and are fresh out of school will work for large corporations as O.L.'s, or office ladies. They will do this until they get married. Once married, they will probably not work. Later, if money is needed, piece work or department stores are viable options.

While having so many women in the work force is a new way of life, so is the younger generation of the workers. Their work habits will dramatically affect the course of Japanese firms. More employees are switching jobs. Previously, one worked for one company for life. Some are wanting promotions based on skill, not the number of years that have been served. Along with changing their work habits, the younger Japanese are changing their monetary habits. Since most will not be able to afford a home, salaries are used for pleasure. The savings

rate is decreasing while luxury items' sales are increasing. Due to the previously high savings rate, banks were capable of financing companies at extraordinary levels. Some borrowed up to 80 percent of their needed funds. With a lower savings rate, banks will not have the available funds to back businesses at such high rates. I foresee the debt/equity ratio changing while businesses cope with the new structure.

Not only do the companies have structure, but much of it seems to be unwritten. Watching the old men do exercises every morning at Komatsu became routine for me after I saw it so often. I grew accustomed to seeing O.L.'s bow and serve tea, although I never liked it. When I was attending a party following a style show for which I was a model, I noticed a definite structure even though the business was small. No one ate or drank until the owner gave a short speech. Everything was set, but the food chilled as the guests and employees waited. Once the party began, a "loose" environment entered the room as everyone filled their plates and others' cups. The Japanese do not help themselves to refills, so we Americans would ask each other to pour another drink! All of a sudden, an employee stood at the food table and said something we did not understand. At once, all became hushed as the room was cleared and we all left within ten minutes. I was struck by the sharp contrasts and the brevity of the intimate atmosphere. People who had been jumping around for pictures and loudly carrying on were suddenly subdued.

Since Japanese people tend to be more subdued than Americans, I became interested in their basic, fundamental values. I began a study on religion in Japan only to find that it is very different from my experiences in the States. The concept of an omnipotent God is not easy for them. A grove of bamboo trees may be a god, as may an animal. Shinto is the unique Japanese religion that was described to me as a way of life. Buddhism is more of a religion as we might think of religion. Food is placed at the butsudan as prayers are given. A common prayer is for a productive day. Homes may have another place for Shinto prayers. Food is also placed by the object, perhaps a plant. The food is usually rice, with fruits also being present. I did a survey, asking about Japanese religion. Some said they were Christians, but most named Buddhism and Shinto. Unlike Christians who attend a church, one goes to various shrines depending on needs. Each shrine has a purpose, such as passing an exam or a happy marriage.

There were more Christians than I would have thought, but that could have been caused by my general location and the type of people that I met. However, Christian influence is seen throughout the country. There are Jehovah's Witnesses in Tokyo subway trains and churches in certain cities. The largest influence could be seen in the department stores. The department stores were full of Western trends. By the end of October, Christmas music was being played throughout the stores. Window decorations were of the Christmas spirit, and a

large selection of Christmas cards were available. It was a holiday for retailers, not religion. Christmas cakes are a large part of the holiday for the Japanese. One may order the cake with various figures on top and different fillings. While eating the cake with friends, one may be surrounded by New Year's Eve-type decorations instead of the traditional fare we use.

With so much Western influence, I wonder why the Japanese do not react against the government since so many sectors of their lives could be better. For the amount of money present in the country, people live poorly. Rice is priced much above what it should be. Fresh produce is also quite expensive, but these prices are accepted. Since harmony is an important part of their lifestyles, the Japanese avoid conflict if it is possible. However, I feel that the people are being unfairly treated. Better housing is needed, and working conditions for the smaller firms need to be upgraded. Maybe I am viewing Japan with a bias since we have so much in the United States. The Japanese are accustomed to their economy and, when questioned about the high prices of consumer items, they tend to respond favorably.

Propriety also has strong roots in the area of gift giving. When studying Japanese society, one must not overlook the importance of gifts. One is expected to give them at certain times. The gift must be carefully chosen, so it is appropriate



for the giver and receiver. One's status in society must be considered when choosing what to give. Especially for funerals and weddings, one finds listings of gifts given and by whom. This is so that one may review the list and return a similar gift at the appropriate time. The gift given may not be better than one received from a superior. On the other hand, if one's status is more superior, a nicer gift should be given to a lower status. One does not want to make others uncomfortable. It is also better to buy gifts from department stores than it is to make items at home. The status of the store is often seen more than the gift itself. When visiting one's home, a gift is usually taken. Candy is often a good choice. As a foreigner, one is not expected to know all rules of propriety. I always visited with gifts in tow because I did not want to be offensive. I was usually also given a gift. Some people had many wrapped packages for me. Having a gift wrapped at a store, with no extra charge, is common practice.

Gift giving is also a component of indebtedness. When one is given a present, the favor is usually quickly returned. I gave a friend's parents a box of candy when I had dinner at their home. A few days later, Mitsuko came back to our room with a box of cookies from her mom. "Owing" someone is not a position in which the Japanese like to be. Even doing someone a small kindness may be perceived as a debt that must be repaid. Gifts are also very important in December and in the summer. At these times of the year, employees receive large bonuses that

often equal three times their monthly salary. Gifts are also exchanged. One visits the department stores for their purchases. The store devotes one floor to gifts and order taking. Gifts are usually useful items that are nicely packaged. Salad oil, slippers, soap, and beer are often seen. I have never imagined receiving 24 bars of soap for Christmas! Less practical gifts are also available, but the useful items are most plentiful.

The abundance of practical gifts is nothing when compared to the great number of Japanese people in Japan. This statement sounds ridiculously obvious, but the Japanese are very homogeneous, and one does not see the variety of physical differences one sees in the United States. At first glance, everyone looks very similar and I, being a blond American, brought a lot of attention. People would often touch my hair, stare intently, and even follow me. Some days it bothered me to extremes, while other times I enjoyed the attention. Since we were obviously not Japanese, people usually reacted to us. Most were quite friendly. Books were given to me while on trains, and one friend received a beautiful pearl ring from a small jeweler in Kyoto. The homogeneity causes some problems. The Japanese are facing a worker shortage at the present time. This is due to the fact that only Japanese males are wanted. If Koreans and other non-Japanese living in Japan were given the opportunity to work, the shortage would be a surplus.

With so many people living in Japan and with the great technology their workers produce, one would think that the medical profession would be one of quality. Although they are not awful, the physicians do not make me comfortable. They overmedicate since they make their money from drugs. The government pays for their services, so they do not become wealthy from patient work. The doctors do not tell the patient much about their condition. They do not like to be questioned and, consequently, they do not provide much information. When I was ill, I could not get a straight diagnosis of my problem. I became quite scared and returned home. Other Americans have their share of medical horror stories. Even those who have been in Japan for years still distrust the medical community. The Japanese government is very helpful to foreign students. They refund 80 percent of our medical expenses when the proper procedures are followed. However, refunds take quite a while to receive. I think that much of the doctors' behavior can be attributed to propriety and status. The doctor feels slightly superior and may not feel the need to be obliging.

The society has many unwritten rules. One is not to eat while on the train or bus. One does not carry a drink like Americans do when walking. It was quite amazing to realize how much Americans eat and drink while not seated at a table. Although it was not proper, we Americans carried drinks and ate on the run when we felt like it. We are foreigners and no one usually cared. Crossing one's legs was also a faux pas. One friend

had her leg kicked by a man sitting next to her on the train! I saw Japanese people sitting with crossed legs and they were not kicked, but it probably depends upon the area in which one travels.

While on the trains and busses, I noticed that people did not give up their seats to the elderly, the pregnant, or women with small children. I usually gave my seat to those who needed it more than I. Sometimes, people around me would also offer their seats after I made the gesture. Protests came first when I offered my seat. Then a flow of "thank you's" streamed through their lips as they accepted my seat. I always felt better, but I received strange looks. If one is not Japanese, society will always view him or her as a foreigner. No matter how much time is spent in Japan, even if one is born there, a non-Japanese will always be an outsider.

But, even outsiders will pick up Japanese habits. By using public transportation, one will quickly learn Japanese habits. One of the hardest to adjust to is the crowded bus or train. The subways and trains get so many people on them that faces press against other faces. The busses have a smaller capacity, but there is always room for one more! One easily learns to keep amused by riding the trains. The socks worn by most people are quite interesting. From young girls to older men, one sees many odd socks being worn. Bright colors with contrasting patterns, socks that do not match the outfit, and

mismatched socks can be seen. According to one school girl, the daily game is to see who has the cutest socks. Since they have uniform clothes and bookbags, socks are the only area for fun dressing.

The best time to get a good look at the socks is while the person is sleeping on the train. Most Japanese take train naps. It makes sense since they often have long commutes. I found it odd when I had a stranger sleeping on my shoulder. However, one day I fell asleep for two stops. I knew I had been in Japan too long! Many people read while riding. Most men read comic books, but they are not what we think of as comics. They are usually very sexual, often pornographic. Nintendo Game-Boys are gaining popularity, too. For an interesting train ride, take the first trains on the weekend. Everyone who has been out all night will be heading home. Keep yourself armed with newspaper since someone might get sick. Throw them your paper and ignore it. They will cover their mess.

While getting used to trains, one may pick up some of the Japanese mannerisms. If any length of time is spent in the country, bowing will become an automatic reaction. When unsure of something or thinking, a Japanese will tilt the head upward and suck in air through the teeth with a slight hiss. This will usually be accompanied by a phrase equivalent to, "Well, ..." To my surprise, I found myself also using these

expressions. My roommate often made very annoying noises. Thankfully, I never adapted that much. The Japanese do have a subtle way of turning down an invitation. The head is tilted to one side and "chotto" is said in a drawn-out manner. No explanation is needed as to why one is busy or unable or unwilling to go. This polite gesture is sufficient. Noises are also a part of eating. Noodles are slurped; and the louder it is, the better it is.

Many consumer goods are viewed in the light of the more expensive it is, the more one wants to buy it. Sales are not extremely popular, but they exist. Clothes are very expensive. The fashions amazed me. Some of the clothing was incredible, but the price was also extraordinary. Japanese people always look nice. Even when one is shopping, a neat appearance is present. The children have great clothes and usually look great even when playing. One common motif is English phrases on the clothing. "Hello Kitty" is a very popular line of accessories and toys. All ages and both sexes wear the "cutesy" items. Even teenage boys have cute belongings, including bags, jackets, hats and sweaters. The phrases usually make no sense and are accompanied by pictures of some sort.

Part of the popularity of these "cutesy" items stems from the fact that the Japanese are much less mature than their American counterparts. College students act like high schoolers while

even older high schoolers seem as if they are still in junior high school. This is reflected in attitudes, hair styles, and clothing choices. Their bodies mature, but they act young. A teenage pregnancy is not good in any country, but Japanese youngsters are not taught about sex. The girl will circulate an anonymous container in which other girls place money to contribute to her abortion. The boys take no responsibility in these situations. In fact, the women are told that the birth control pill is dangerous and often deadly, if they are informed of its existence at all.

The Japanese are some of the kindest people one will ever meet. They truly wanted to visit with us and help us when necessary. For the most part, Americans are very well liked, even admired. As I came to know various areas of the country, I found that people from all areas were generous and went out of their way to be kind. Even in the terrible days of hot, muggy weather and annoying crowds, the Japanese were wonderful.

There are so many places to visit in Japan. Shrines and temples are everywhere, and I grew tired of visiting them since most are quite alike. The castles also have the same designs. Certain temples and shrines are special and are worth spending time getting to know. Kyoto is full of history. I especially enjoyed the Royal Palace. I could just imagine what it was like centuries ago. Japan is a beautiful country. I loved Tokyo and all its many sections. Ueno Park is huge. There are

museums in this famous Tokyo park, and one may see families together if it is a weekend. Seeing families together is very new. Fathers are just beginning to spend time with the children and spend time outside the home with them. Miyajima is an island slightly west of Hiroshima. It is very quaint and gives one the impression of being in Imperial Japan. This country is full of great places in a small area.

My four months in Japan were a very positive experience. It created a great interest in this financial power's future of which I have my speculations. I learned a great deal about myself and others. People are very similar yet there are marked differences. We must be aware of these differences and respect them. Although parts of my trip were not my happiest moments in life, they were still an important part of the overall journey. I became a better and stronger person because of my time in Japan. I also learned how much my family means to me and how much we Americans really have. I plan to return, hopefully soon. I wonder which Japan I will meet next time, but I will not worry. There is no doubt that the pleasure will be mine.