

DIRECT TRANSLATION IMPOSSIBLE

**TALES FROM THE LAND
OF THE RISING SUN**



CHAD FRISK

DIRECT TRANSLATION IMPOSSIBLE

Tales From the Land of the Rising Sun

To Kelli Spann

For introducing me to Japan and making me want to learn everything about it

To Sachiko Smith

For always giving me a place to come back to

To Ron Takemoto

For helping me realize how little I knew

To Maruzuka Junior High School and Sato and Kaba Elementary Schools

For five of the best years of my life

To my friends (Japanese and foreign) in Hamamatsu

For making a foreign country feel like home

To my friends in America

For suffering all of the stories that started, "When I was in Japan..."

To my family

For letting me go

Pleased to Meet You



Hello everyone. My name is Chad. I am from America. I am twenty-eight years old. I play baseball and tennis, and my favorite fruit is pineapple. My hobby is reading books. Nice to meet you.

“Ugh,” you’re thinking. *“Anyone can publish a book these days.”*

It’s a simple opening, yes. But it had to be. It’s the self-introduction I gave thousands of times when I was living and teaching in Japan; if it had been any more complicated my students wouldn’t have been able to understand it.

Japan and I first met when I was fourteen; we have been inseparable ever since. I studied there during college, and then moved to a city called Hamamatsu after I graduated. I lived in Hamamatsu

for five years, teaching English in elementary and junior high schools. I stayed with Japanese families. I spent hours untangling lines and hauling kites at Japanese festivals. I rode the Tokaido, Sanyo, Hokuriku, Joetsu, and Kyushu Lines across the country. I became friends with teachers, chefs, business owners, teenagers, journalists, sarari-men, office ladies, hairdressers, baristas, x-ray technicians, DJs, and Irish people.

Japan reshaped me. I didn't used to eat *cooked* fish, but now I eat sashimi all the time. I love nake hot springs, and an anime called One Piece is my favorite TV show. I prefer sitting on the floor to a chair, use chopsticks at every opportunity, crave *mochi* at odd hours, bow to people from my car or on the telephone, and occasionally gather my thoughts in haiku.

I don't remember who I was before Japan.

When I tell people I lived in Japan for five years they almost invariably say something to the effect of, "Wow, that's really interesting." Then they look off into the middle distance and try unsuccessfully to imagine what it must have been like. What's the appeal of Japan? Isn't the language impossible to learn? Don't they write up and down? Don't they eat fish for breakfast?

What would it be like to *live* in a place like that?

Nobody has the foggiest idea.

Part One

AMERICANS DONT KNOW ANYTHING (ABOUT JAPAN)



Grades Aren't Everything

I decided to take Japanese on a whim—or, more specifically, on my mom's whim. I was a freshman in high school that had to pick a language elective and had no idea what to do. Summer vacation ticked away. Back to School Night rolled around, and I still hadn't decided.

My mom had seen enough.

"You have to choose something, Chad."

"I know."

"The school offers Spanish, French, German, or Japanese. Which one are you going to take?"

I shrugged. None of them got my motor running.

Mom sighed, "Japanese looks interesting. Why don't you give it a shot?"

Japanese? Why would I take Japanese? I loved Pokemon, sure, but so did everyone else. Still, I had even fewer reasons to take French.

"Okay. Yeah. Sure," I replied. "Why not?"

It didn't seem like a life-changing decision at the time, but I guess life-changing decisions don't make themselves known right away.

I clearly remember my first class. I entered the room and searched for a seat, entranced by the calligraphy and *ukiyo* prints on the walls. The bell rang and a tall, young-looking white woman stepped to the front and started delivering instructions. In Japanese. I had no idea what was going on. I looked around, hoping to pick up some cues from my classmates, but all I saw were wide eyes and slack jaws. The teacher kept saying things. It was clear she wanted us to do something, but it wasn't clear what. We sat for a moment, leaking nervous giggles as we waited for the English to come. She didn't. She kept talking, eventually adding some gestures. To this day I have no idea what she was saying. *Stand up! Look at the board! Sit down!* We just tried to follow her hand gestures and make it through the hour.

The language was the most bizarre string of noises I had ever heard. "Ohayo gozaimas¹." What the hell was "Ohio goes I mahss" supposed to mean? Do that many Japanese people live in Cleveland? I thought Japanese was the stupidest thing I had ever heard.

Japanese would continue to sound strange to me for the next decade. Fortunately, however, after a few months it ceased to be just a bizarre string of sounds. It changed into a string of magic words, and I needed to learn them all².

School was never very difficult for me. I teetered on the edge of a nervous breakdown if I ever g

less than 95% on a test. I was essentially equally capable in every subject, but for whatever reason (thought I) was particularly good at Japanese. I learned the alphabet (the syllabaries to be exact (there are two)) right away, and memorized all of the kanji on the walls. I listened to the teacher's pronunciation and practiced at home until I could copy it. I worked out grammar patterns before she taught them to us, and all in all was pretty proud of myself.

I got great grades and the big head that went along with them. It was a trick, though. My grades fooled me into thinking I knew things, when in fact I didn't know anything at all.

My First Trip To Japan

Every other year, Spann Sensei took a group of students to Japan. When I was a sophomore, I was one of them. I had never left America before—I had never even been out of state without my parents before—but I wasn't that nervous. My Japanese was pretty good, after all, so I would be fine. That's what I thought. I had yet to realize that test scores don't mean anything. I put on the group's windbreaker, said my farewells, and got on the plane.

Looking back, I wish I had spent the flight savoring my self-confidence because it was soon to disappear.

The trip was divided into two parts. The first part was group sightseeing in Kyoto, which was amazing. I'm not sure there's anything more exciting than exploring a foreign country with a group of friends. Everything was strange, and I looked upon it all with wonder, even those things that today strike me as totally uninteresting. If I could recapture the joy I felt upon learning that Japanese toilets have seat warmers, I would probably die on the spot.

I still have very clear memories from that trip. Lines of tour buses. The green wall of hedges leading to the precincts of a dark wooden temple called the Silver Pavilion. Vending machines filled with unfamiliar drinks and coins of actual value rapidly disappearing into them. We went to a shrine called Heian Jingu, where I had myself photographed pretending to meditate on a rock. We went to a theme park called Nagashima Spa Land and had the entire place to ourselves because it snowed unexpectedly in mid-afternoon. The Steel Dragon wasn't running, but we rode the White Cyclone about twenty times instead.

I went to my first *onsen*. An *onsen* is a Japanese hot spring. When Americans think of hot springs they think of slimy, sulfurous pools of algae-infested muck hidden in the woods and patronized by otherwise unbathed, unshaven hippies. Japanese hot springs are, thankfully, different. Frequented by everyone, they are clean, reputable, well-maintained, landscaped, and occasionally located in the middle of the city. People get naked, and just sort of sit around together. It sounds weird, but it's not (seriously, it isn't). Our school didn't allow us to get naked (and no one would have if they did), so we soaked in our swimsuits. The Japanese people laughed at us, but we didn't particularly care. Spann Sensei's husband received an unsolicited back scrub from a naked old man. We freaked out. It started snowing as we sat in the springs and I clearly remember thinking, "I could stay in this country forever."

I loved Kyoto. There was the good: the joy of staying in my first Japanese inn; and there was the terrible: the taste of my first Japanese breakfast. I will never forget either. I was in awe of the temple and for a moment thought I might like to become a monk (thankfully I did not act on the impulse). If the trip had ended in Kyoto, it would have been the most amazing trip ever.

But the trip didn't end in Kyoto.

Home School

For the second part of the trip, the scene shifted to a small town in Saitama Prefecture called Kounosu. We went there because a few years earlier Spann Sensei had been an ALT in Kounosu. ALT stands for Assistant Language Teacher, a job held by native English speakers in public elementary, junior high, and high schools. My high school classmates and I weren't sent to Kounosu to be ALTs, however. We were sent to Kounosu to make fools of ourselves in Japanese homes.

Before leaving America, I was excited for the homestay. I got a hand-written letter from my host family, a father, mother, younger brother and younger sister—the exact same configuration as my own family. I figured I would fit right in.

After being in Japan for a few days, however, my feelings towards the homestay changed. I started to realize how little Japanese I actually knew. Kyoto was amazing, a steady stream of moving experiences, but that's because I was surrounded by people who spoke English. I was in Japan, but I didn't feel like it. As long as you're with friends you can easily get by in a place that doesn't make any sense. You can laugh off the language barrier. Sure, you can't read a menu, ask for directions, or understand what people are saying. You don't know what's polite and what's rude. You don't care because none of it applies to you.

We spent four days in and around Kyoto, visiting temples, going to hot springs, and eating sushi off conveyor belts, but the truth is that we didn't really interact with any Japanese people. Sightseeing is great, but it isn't cultural exchange. Getting thrown into the middle of a family would be. It meant that I could no longer escape the fact that I was in a foreign country. As the transition from simple sightseeing to actual cultural exchange drew near, my anxiety levels went up accordingly.

The day finally came. I said goodbye to my friends and got into my host family's mini-van, head pounding in my chest.

The first conversation I had with real Japanese people went worse than I thought it would. As I got into the car, they asked me something using words I had never heard. I replied with something random. Silence. They asked me something else. I grunted and nodded. More silence. After a minute I thought to ask my fifth-grade host brother something, but realized that I didn't know how to address him.

In Japanese the proper way to address someone depends on a number of factors. Are they older or otherwise more socially powerful than you? Is this the first time you've met them? What day of the week is it? Have you eaten dinner yet? What color shirt are they wearing? Is Saturn in ascendancy or the house of Mars? At the time, I knew there was system, but I didn't know how it worked. Eventually

I settled for a hesitant “Teppei-san...” (Not quite Mr. Tepei, but not how you normally address a ten-year-old boy, either.). The car lit up with laughter that quickly died out into more silence.

Welcome to Japan. The real learning starts now.

My Poor Host Mother

Japanese is notorious among foreign learners for its differing levels of formality. There’s 1) Casual Street Language, spoken with family or friends; 2) a more formal type of conjugation for, I suppose you could say, All-Purpose Politeness; and 3) the highest level of formality, Royal Court Speech, in which speakers alternately debase themselves and deify the people they are addressing (this sounds complicated, and it is, but not impossibly so. You can figure it out in a decade). In class, we learned All-Purpose Politeness, which is where you should start. The last thing we need is a nation of American children learning to speak like Yakuza members. Nevertheless, All-Purpose Politeness isn’t the type of language used in the home.

That posed a problem.

We drove to the family’s house and brought my luggage into the room I was to use, an immaculate Japanese-style room with a tatami floor. Then my host mother started asking me things. At that point I had lost all confidence in my Japanese. I had no idea what she was saying. She repeated herself numerous times, to no avail. Berating myself for not understanding her, I managed to move the conversation along, which is to say, I shrugged and nodded a lot, hoping she would stop talking. Eventually, she pulled out a futon and sent me off to brush my teeth.

Later on I figured out what she was trying to say. It wasn’t anything terribly difficult. Faced with the task of communicating with a 16 year-old boy who didn’t even understand that, it’s amazing the woman didn’t pass out. Maybe she did, just in a place where I couldn’t see her.

I was like a dog. I remember at one point being taken for a walk in the park—I wasn’t leashed but probably should have been—as the family tried to find something this confused, mute kid they were stuck with *could* do. I couldn’t say much, but eventually felt I had to say *something*. Luckily, I was prepared. There was a vocabulary list among the pre-departure material we received, and one item on the list was the word “Takahashi,” which was translated into English as “a Japanese name”.

“Wow,” I thought to myself, “that’s a really cool word. I could use that. I will memorize it.”

So I did. As I walked in the park with my host mother, I thought I would say something nice about my host sister’s name, Mizuki.

“Mizuki,” I proudly said to her, “That’s a great Takahashi.”

Mizuki, that’s a great Japanese name. I thought I had made a clever sentence. But the confused look on my host mother’s face made it evident that something was wrong. It turns out that “Takashashi” doesn’t mean “a Japanese name,” but rather *is* a Japanese name. If a foreign child were to come up to you and say, “Jessica, that’s a great Smith,” you would probably be as confused as my host mother was.

Of course, that wasn’t the only stupid thing I did. The house I stayed in had a peculiar bathroom

After our walk, my host mother asked if I'd like to take a bath. "Wonderful," I thought, "I would love a bath," and nodded enthusiastically. She led me into the laundry room, past the washer and dryer, and up to a frosted glass door. On the other side of the frosted glass door was a tiled room with a bathtub. My host mother parked me in front of the frosted glass door, said, "Go ahead, take a bath," and left the room.

I had no experience with a bath room of this sort (because it really was a *bath* room; there was nothing in it but a tub and a shower head) and had no idea where to take off my clothes. Should I take them off in the laundry room and just go into the bath room naked? Or should I take them off inside the bath room? I remembered from the orientation material that in Japan you are supposed to shower on the tile floor *outside* the tub before getting in, and so I worried that my clothes would get wet if I took them inside. I sat there for a few minutes debating, kicking myself for not envisioning this situation at the pre-departure question-and-answer session. Eventually, I decided to go ahead and disrobe in the laundry room. Unfortunately, it took me about five minutes to come to that decision, so as I was in the process of pulling my t-shirt over my head, my host mother walked into the room with a basket of dirty clothes.

She then quickly walked out of the room with a basket of dirty clothes.

My host mother did all sorts of things for me. She made me breakfast every morning. I didn't eat it because I couldn't stand the idea of fish, seaweed, and pickles first thing in the morning, but I appreciated the effort. When I was starting to get tired of Japan, she took me to Tsutaya (a bookstore/video rental store) and let me rent a copy of Jurassic Park. She even washed my underwear.

I couldn't say anything, do anything, or understand anything. Going to a foreign country made me feel like I had gone back to being a baby. I was even worse-off than a baby. Babies are cute, and everyone loves them because evolutionary instinct compels them to. When babies are in trouble, all they have to do is cry and someone will rush to help them. They aren't expected to know anything, and don't have any memories of the relatively independent life they were leading in America before coming to stupid Japan.

What exactly was my host mother trying to say to me on that first night? She wasn't asking for my opinion on modern Japanese politics. She wasn't trying to tell me about the Japanese national abducted by North Korea, and she wasn't quizzing me on Tokugawa Ieyasu's rise to Shogun.

"Did you eat dinner?" That's what she was asking me. "Did you eat dinner?"

The problem was that she wasn't using All-Purpose Politeness. She was using Casual Street Language, and I hadn't learned that yet. I suffered defeat at the hands of colloquial speech, and for a guy as proud of his intellect as I was, it was a painful one.

It was also inevitable. And enlightening. I didn't actually know everything and that meant I still had things to learn. If I still had things to learn then it was time to get back to work.

Othello and Futons

My first attempt at international exchange was certainly full of false starts, but it wasn't all bad. L

me tell you a success story.

In addition to my hardworking host mother, I also had a host father, a host sister, and two host grandparents. My host father was busy with work and didn't get home until what I deemed to be very late (although a Japanese teenager probably would not). I don't remember much about the host grandparents. Mizuki, my host sister with the nice Takahashi, was cute, but was also about five years old.

That leaves my host brother, Teppei.

A boy of few words, Teppei and I were well matched. To be fair, I'm not sure if Teppei was actually a quiet kid or not, but I can't remember having a single conversation with him. We must have had some sort of verbal exchange. I'm sure I at least tried to ask him a question, and I'm sure he replied. He probably tried talking to me as well. We had no idea what the other was saying anyway.

And that was fine. That was, in fact, perfect. I wasn't exactly in a position to be having riveting conversations with anyone. Teppei knew that. It wasn't a secret that I didn't understand Japanese. It didn't get in the way of our friendship, though.

Our friendship was built on a different language: play.

We had baseball and we had board games. I was on the baseball team, and brought my glove to prepare for the upcoming season. Teppei was a baseball player, too, and we played a lot of catch in the street. We did calligraphy together, and while I don't remember what I wrote (it was terrible and I threw it away as soon as I got home), Teppei's *katakana* rendition of "Seattle Mariners" would hang in my room for years to come. Baseball was an important part of our friendship, but when I think of Teppei the first word that comes to mind is "Othello," the board game he carried into my room one day. He sat me down, taught me the rules, and then proceeded to beat me every time. Mizuki came over and beat me once or twice. They had a dog, and if we had played I'm sure he would have beaten me, too. I didn't represent America well, but I was fine with that. It was enough to even be participating.

When I arrived home from school, I noticed that there were two futons on the floor of my room. One of them was Teppei's. The last two nights of my stay were slumber parties.

Teppei and I couldn't really communicate but somehow we managed to become friends. On my last day, the whole family took me to the train station. I can still remember watching Teppei cry. My host mother might have cried too, but I'm sure it was out of relief.

The Illusion of Fate

What should come next is a confession. That on that day—my last day—I truly fell in love with Japan. That on the plane home I swore to myself that when I graduated from college I would move to Japan and live there forever. That my future was set and it would be festooned with cherry blossoms.

If I said that, though, I would be lying.

I loved Kyoto because it matched my expectations of what Japan would be. My high school Japanese classroom was an incredibly appealing place. The kanji on the walls together with the haphazard placement of a few rice-paper screens made me feel like I had *gone somewhere*. Kyoto felt

like an extension of my classroom, and I loved it.

I wasn't so sure about the rest of the country, though. The rest of the country just made me feel dumb.

Footnotes

1. "Good Morning"
2. Or perhaps catch 'em all.

Perception and Misperception

Before I left, Japan was divided into two countries in my mind: Beautiful Japan and Bizarro Japan.

Beautiful Japan was traditional: temples, shrines, and cups of tea steaming in paper partitioned silence; wabi, sabi (art words that many people know but no one actually understands); wooden houses lining cobblestone streets and rock gardens in repose. I thought that all of Japan was an art exhibition.

Buried beneath Japan the Beautiful, however, was an awareness of Japan the Absurd. I thought that Japan was, essentially, a really weird place. We watched Japanese TV commercials in our Seattle classroom, and rather than the familiar cast of over-brushed models that appear in American commercials, the Japanese reels were staffed by dancing people in character costumes. Dogs, cats, dinosaurs, a large, leering thing reminiscent of a brownie, Mt. Fuji with eyeballs, a host of other hybrid creatures so foreign to the American psyche as to be almost invisible. These dancing characters seemed to be everywhere, representing even stolid establishments like banks and hospitals.

“Are all Japanese people weird?” I wondered.

Then there was “The Ultimate Challenge,” a sado-masochistic Japanese game show in which dorky contestants tried to conquer various obstacles on the way to a finish line. That was the premise anyway; most of the show was just people face-planting in mud puddles.

“All Japanese people are weird,” I concluded.

In all honesty I didn’t love Bizarro Japan, though I did like to laugh at it. Bizarro Japan was one of the best jokes I knew. But I didn’t want to be identified with it. I liked Beautiful Japan. A lot. But I made sure to keep Bizarro Japan at an appropriately ironic distance.

Then I saw Japan in person and didn’t know what to think anymore.

At first, the rows of quiet, wooden houses that feature so prominently on postcards were nowhere to be seen. On the bus from Kansai Airport I looked out the window and what did I see? Gabled roofs, soaring Buddhas, towering pagodas? No. I saw concrete high-rises and net-enclosed driving ranges, pachinko parlors and the gray maze of freeway on- and off-ramps. “Where is Beautiful Japan?” I thought to myself, “Did I get on a plane to Poland by mistake?”

Bizarro Japan, by contrast, was evident on every street corner. I let out a sigh every time I walked past an arcade full of UFO catchers, wishing it were a temple instead.

A Survey, If You Please

Americans don't know anything (about Japan). Is that true? I wanted to find out.

So I formulated a very simple survey and sent it out to a few of my friends and family (statisticians be warned: high incidence of convenience bias to follow). It had two questions.

When you hear the word Japan, what's the first thing that comes to mind?

When that fades away, what else comes to mind?

I was hoping for some stereotypes and for some deeper knowledge. This is what I got. My thoughts are included below each response.

Mark. Adult Male. Mid-50s. Sales Manager for a Mechanical Installation Company. Never Been to Japan.

Question One: When you hear the word "Japan", what's the first thing that comes to mind?

"Intense culture, honorable, focused society."

Question Two: When that fades away, what else comes to mind?

"A country that has trouble having fun; thus it lacks creativity and seems to have a hard time with interpersonal communication. Japan does have some great traits: Takes care of their elders (I love this, the USA is missing the boat here), and can take a great idea and make it even better through hard work and diligence."

I can't speak to Japanese creativity but I did take a class on Japanese politics from a professor who thought he could. Let me paraphrase him: "Whereas Japanese companies haven't historically been so good at innovation as American companies, they have been better at optimization." Americans make things but the Japanese make them work better. That insight cost me a few thousand dollars in tuition but you can have it for free. It is at least partially true.

Luke. 26 Year-Old Male. At Time of Survey Progressing Towards a Doctorate in Material Science. Mariners Fan. Never been to Japan.

Question One:

"Ichiro, Sushi, Fish, Tsunami, Samurai, Anime."

Question Two:

"Cherry blossoms, World War II, Stoicism, Order, Science, Crazy Fashion trends."

That was about as much as I knew going in, too.

Richard. Adult Male in his 80s. Former Member of the US Navy. Has Been to Japan.

Question One:

"Pearl Harbor, atomic bomb."

Question Two:

“Nice country, nice people.”

(For those who had been to Japan, there was a third question.)

Question Three: Tell me a couple ways in which Japan was different than you thought would be.

“Smart people, good-hearted, great place to visit.”

This is a particularly interesting response because it highlights the dramatic shift in relations between the two countries following WWII. I think you might be hard pressed to find a country that currently stands as pro-US as Japan (maybe Israel?), which is remarkable given the atomic bomb referenced in this man’s answer to question one.

Kim. Adult Female. Mid-50s. Nanny. Never Been to Japan.

Question One:

“I think the very first things that come to mind are earthquakes and now tsunamis.”

Question Two:

“After pausing a moment I think of advanced technologies, over population, and temples with sloping roofs.”

Natural disasters are an ever-present threat and inextricable part of life in Japan. As a volcanic island bounded by converging and subducting plates, a devastating earthquake can interrupt the everyday any time. That makes for a continuous string of tragedies. I am amazed at how well Japanese people both prepare for and respond to these disasters.

Loren. 26 Year Old Male. Current M.D. PhD Student. At Time of Survey, Pedi-Cab Driver. Never Been to Japan.

Question One:

“Sushi! Sake! Karaoke! Anime!”

Question Two:

“And on second reflection (still pretty superficial since I’m going on exactly zero personal experience) I think in terms of peaceful spaces contrasting with bustling, efficient cities, speedy trains, neon, and high-tech, along with artfully arranged flowers, food, and fashion. Japanese culture in general seems to pay greater attention to detail than is the norm in the US...which reminds me that I should remedy my vast ignorance with a visit and see for myself.”

Maybe Americans aren't entirely clueless after all.

Indy. 26 Year-Old Male. Aspiring Novelist. Never Been To Japan. Mariners Fan.

Question One:

“Well, the “first impulse” is just a lot of cultural stuff that’s made it into the general American subconscious. The white and red flag, Godzilla, cheap/effective electronics, samurai swords, Pearl Harbor, Anime, Battle Royale, super-crowded cities, super hard-working citizens, used schoolgirl panties in vending machines.... you know, the usual stuff.”

Question Two:

“After those are out of the way, most of my thoughts actually go to one place... Ichiro. I’m sure this isn’t a perfect metaphor, but a lot of the feelings I have towards Ichiro kind of sum up how I feel about Japan. Ichiro is excellent at what he does. At his prime his game had essentially no flaws. He set MLB records and was a fan favorite and a cultural phenomenon. But the way he was excellent is something I’m not sure I’ll ever fully understand. There’s something fundamentally unapproachable about Ichiro. He’s personable, and funny, and definitely not aloof or cold, but I can’t imagine ever having an actual conversation with the guy, even if there wasn’t a language barrier. I look up to him, for sure. His approach to the game, the way he carries himself... I’d like to be like that. I’m just not sure I could be.”

I think Indy is onto something very real when he talks about Ichiro’s work ethic, attention to detail, and inscrutability. Ichiro’s approach to his job fits into a long and respected tradition in Japan: that of the craftsman. Japanese craftsmen are defined by being infinitely serious about their particular craft and as a consequence very good at it. It’s a special kind of absorption that you don’t often find in America. By no means are all Japanese people craftsmen; it takes years of intense discipline and personal privation to get to that point. But those who are don’t mess around.

“I watched a documentary called The Great Happiness Space about these male hosts in Japanese clubs. It was pretty interesting. Of course you’re getting a tiny sample, and I’m sure it represents Japan as a whole the way The Jersey Shore represents the States as a whole. But it did reaffirm my view that there’s no fundamental “Other.” I mean, at a basic, basic, basic level we’re all looking for the same thing.

There certainly seems to be a relative “Others”, though, because on the level where cultural norms live and are cemented, I do feel there’s something more “Other” about Japan than say, Switzerland. I feel like if I spent two years in a European country I’d pick up the culture easier than I would in Japan. In Europe things would be different but it would be shades of difference, different outcomes starting from the same basic configuration. In Japan I feel like there’s a whole different starting configuration. I’m not sure if that’s true or not. I’ve never been there. But that would be my honest opinion based on all the little bits I’ve

assimilated over the years.”

I think it makes a lot of sense to think of cultures in terms of configurations of interchangeable parts. At the base level I think those parts correspond to beliefs. Beliefs constellate, beliefs interlock, certain beliefs fit together better than others. Culture is the composite of all those little beliefs.

I received a number of other responses, all of which were very thoughtful and nuanced. But let me be honest, most of the people I surveyed were very highly educated. It's no surprise that they either knew a lot, or were hyper-aware that they didn't know very much. Maybe I should have gone into high school, found a group of sixteen year-olds, and asked them instead. Then I might feel less embarrassed for my high school self.

That is, unless their answers were also thoughtful and nuanced, in which case I would be in real trouble.

Part Two

GOING BACK FOR MORE



Too Big for My Britches

I went back to Japan when I was a senior in high school. But I almost didn't. Let me tell you why.

One of the reasons I loved my high school Japanese class was the continuity of classmates from year to year. There weren't nearly as many students taking Japanese as there were taking, say, Spanish, so you largely stayed with the same group of kids every year. That doesn't happen very often in high school. There are certainly benefits to starting fresh (you can meet new people and escape potentially negative environments), but when you are in a class with the same people for four years in a row, you end up getting pretty comfortable around them.

Unfortunately, there is danger in familiarity, one that leads teenagers to think they can get away with anything. That may or may not result in video projects that are entirely inappropriate for school viewing.

We were doing a health unit, and at the end of such units it was customary in our Japanese class to make a video. The assignment for the health unit was to make an infomercial for a drug. Clearly we were supposed to be marketing a pharmaceutical product, but we heard drug and immediately jumped to narcotics.

Our video was for a fictional product called Snort that purportedly alleviated sinus congestion, but it was very clearly just cocaine. It featured a junkie, a drug dealer, a drug deal, and a demonstration of how to administer the drug (by spreading a line of white powder on the hood of a car and then Snorting it). We used flour, and while I've never used or seen anybody use actual cocaine—unless you count all of the scenes in *The Wolf of Wall Street*—I feel like it was a fairly realistic demonstration.

Our video was amazing. It was also very inappropriate.

We showed it without even thinking it might not be a good idea; we only thought, "This video is super tight!" Our teacher must have agreed, because at first she gave us nearly 100%. And why not? The grammar was sound and we used all of the necessary vocabulary words.

But then she sat down to think about it. Part of the problem was that she was a new teacher. Spanish Sensei went on maternity leave the week before we showed the film. Smith Sensei, a Japanese woman originally from Osaka, replaced her. Not that we cared. We were so sure of ourselves that we would have shown that video to the principal.

Our hubris, however, was interpreted by some as malice. We originally got a high A on the project, but that didn't sit so well with some of our classmates. They, rightly, went up to Smith Sensei and asked if she understood what Snort was very clearly alluding to. An innocent, pure-hearted woman

she did not. They explained to her that Snort was cocaine. She changed her mind about us, and our grade.

She feared that we were trying to take advantage of her: “She’s new, what’s she going to do? Let me make a video about cocaine.” The fact that we had been planning to show it to Spann Sensei didn’t change Smith Sensei’s (reasonable) perception of us as delinquents.

There were two consequences. The first is that we had to redo the video. That was easy. We made a very “G” rated movie about a magic medicinal cauldron. The second consequence was potentially more profound: it brought our pending return trip to Japan into question. Smith Sensei had agreed to take myself and two other guys—one of whom was in the Snort group—to Japan that spring. Smith Sensei called us in after school and, in tears, told us she wasn’t sure if she could trust us anymore.

We went on our very best behavior, bowing and groveling and reciting apologies in Royal Court Speech. We would have begged if we had to do. It was my friends’ first trips, and I would have done anything to go back.

By The Grace of Smith Sensei

We went. Tokyo, Kyoto, Osaka. I still couldn’t speak Japanese.

I had difficulties with another bathroom. I had to use a Japanese-style toilet for the first time. For those of you who have never seen a Japanese-style toilet, they are essentially porcelain-lined holes in the ground. I didn’t use it by choice. It was a day of train travel, and unfortunately your bowels don’t care whether you have somewhere convenient to empty them or not.

It came to the point where my options were 1) Use a Japanese toilet or 2) Die. It was a difficult decision but I eventually chose to live. I entered the stall and spent a few painful seconds staring at the porcelain-lined hole in the ground. “How, exactly, am I supposed to do this?” I wondered. I decided to take off my shoes, my pants, and my underpants. Had I not, the chances are very good that I would have soiled one or all of them. I hung the clothes from a hook on the door, clumsily performed the business and reached for some toilet paper.

That is when I discovered that some public restrooms in Japan do not have toilet paper. Japanese people carry around tissues for such contingencies, but I was not a Japanese person; I was a woeful, unprepared American with nothing of the sort. I frantically considered a number of possible substitutes. Just as I was tugging on the sleeve of my T-shirt to see if I could rip it off, my wallet fell from my pants pocket to the floor. Never before or since have I been so happy to flush my hard-earned dollars down the toilet.

We visited a high school, took photos with the principal, toured the grounds, and ate lunch in the cafeteria with a random, lonely-seeming white guy in his mid-twenties. I didn’t know it at the time but he was the school’s ALT. He was also the ghost of my future.

At one point, I got fed up with how silently and, to use a word latent with cultural prejudice but nevertheless somewhat accurate, efficiently Japanese people walked the streets. “Are these even people,” I wondered to myself, “or well-programmed robots?”³ My friends Sam, Mike, and I decided

to perform an experiment. Could we trick Japanese people into a spontaneous public display of emotion? We found a pocket of space in the eminently crowded Kyoto Station, and spun back to back to back sloppy cartwheels.

Nobody so much as turned to look. Little did I know that this is the universal Japanese response to anything happening in public that is out of the ordinary. My mother, sister and I once stumbled across a drunken man on a train vomiting his purple-stained innards onto the floor. He received the exact same practiced disregard. *It's not that they don't notice you. It's that you are freaking them out.* Of course, we didn't know that at the time and, frustrated at our apparent failure, my confusion with Japanese cultural mores deepened.

I decided I didn't really like Japan that much as a whole. I liked some things about it. I met some great people, I saw some cool stuff, I ate some interesting food, but at no point did I ever think "Wow, I want to live here." I liked sitting in my room and thinking about Japan. I liked walking through imaginary streets and fighting the imaginary ninjas and pulling the imaginary swords from the imaginary stones in the middle of the imaginary enchanted forests. But when I was in the geographic Japan I was forced to admit that all of that stuff was, in fact, imaginary. The reality was that I didn't know anything, couldn't do anything, and felt, appeared, and often acted like an idiot. Maybe I was better off restricting myself to the Japanese places that I could visit via Nintendo cartridges.

It wasn't until returning to America and being treated rudely by customs agents that I was finally able to relax.

"This," I thought to myself (only vaguely aware of the perversity of the thought), "is home."

Footnotes

3. It didn't occur to me that I might be a poorly-programmed robot.

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