

KYOTO INTERNATIONAL CULTURAL ASSOCIATION

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Japanese Culture, My View



Chasing the Japanese Dream:

Land of the Long White Cloud to Land of the Rising Sun

By:

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Chasing the Japanese dream:

From the Land of the Long White Cloud to the Land of the Rising Sun

How does a Brunei-born girl of South Indian descent and with New Zealand citizenship find herself in Japan? Some might call it coincidence, globalization or fate... I call it "Chasing the Japanese dream". My affinity for Asian cultures and languages, penchant for knowledge acquisition, and proclivity for pushing boundaries brought me here...

My view of Japan is that it is a nation of striking contrasts - from its rich cultural heritage to breath-taking cuisine, natural spectacles of cherry blossoms and hot springs, the Land of the Rising Sun draws foreigners like myself from far and wide to indulge in a cultural immersion that is simply second to none.

The depth of Japanese culture traverses the cliché images of martial arts, cars and technological innovations. This country is a realm of dichotomies, whereby old tradition coexists perfectly with the ultra-modern.

A traditional Japanese Inn (旅館, Ryokan) rivals the beauty of cosmopolitan skyscrapers.

A social meal may involve dining at "Makku" (McDonald's) or at street stalls of a Japanese festival or 祭 matsuri.

A corporate executive (サラリーマン, *salaried man*) can be seen riding a bicycle or high-speed bullet train to work.

The seemingly rebellious teenager referred to as コギャル (Kogyaru) transforms into a kimono-clad traditional beauty at her sister's wedding.

... the list is endless.

The Abode of Peace

My personal fascination with Japan stems from the country of my birth, Brunei Darussalam, which is referred to as "The Abode of Peace". Two decades ago and as a six year old child, I started watching the Meiji-period Japanese drama called "*Oshin*" with English subtitles on the television. Born into a poor rural Japanese family, 田倉 しん (*Tanokura Shin*) depicted aspects of Japanese culture and tradition that I would only begin to comprehend two decades later whilst living in the *Land of the Rising Sun*.

Week after week, I grew to love this girl who symbolized perseverance and survival. She took me with her on her obstacle-ridden journey through a blizzard, the great earthquake, and World War II; she resurfaced from physical and verbal abuse, being exiled by her father or sold to a brothel, to eventually becoming a successful entrepreneur and providing for her own family.

Despite the obstacles *Oshin* faced throughout her life, her relentless resilience inspired me.

The Land of the Long White Cloud

As a young teenager, my journey to an unknown land began in 1997 when I left the comforts of home to pursue further education in New Zealand. The indigenous Māori people of New Zealand gave it the name “Aotearoa” or “Land of the Long White Cloud”. Lacking the sense of familiarity, bouts of homesickness often caught me off-guard. Furthermore, coming from a traditional Asian background with a “funny accent”, the culture-shock of having to immediately adapt to Western culture in a boarding school was a challenge. Being fluent in other Asian languages gave me an edge over my classmates when I studied Japanese as a second language – this gave me comfort.

Years passed but my quiescent ambition to experience Japanese culture did not fade. I graduated with an honors degree in biomedical sciences from the University of Auckland and started a career in business. One fortunate day back in 2007, my then Managing Director received an email from an old colleague in Japan working in one of Japan’s best scientific research institute’s biotech spin-off, looking to recruit a person with a Scientific and Business background. Mindful of my desire to pursue further education and my long-standing fascination with Japan, he encouraged me to pursue this avenue. Not long after, I was to start a new life in a country and culture that had intrigued me for decades.

During the transition, I was cognizant of my favorite quote by Hippocrates, the ancient Greek physician:

<i>Ars longa</i> , (art is long)	人生は短く
<i>vita brevis</i> , (life is short)	術を為すには時を要する、
<i>occasio praeceps</i> , (opportunity fleeting)	機会は束の間で
<i>experimentum periculosum</i> , (experiment dangerous)	実験は危険を伴い
<i>iudicium difficile</i> . (judgment difficult)	判断は困難である

Joie de vivre in the Land of the Rising Sun

As I landed in Japan, first and foremost on my mind was *Oshin* journeying from the familiar comforts of home into the unknown. Travelling to a far-away land, I had no guarantees of comfort, happiness, success or self-fulfillment. Nonetheless, I had taken the risk and was ready for the challenge... All I knew was that I was given a new beginning and a fresh start.

I quickly assimilated to life in Japan and doors started opening left, right and centre. Fortunately, I realized quite early on that my forte was at the nexus point where science interfaced with business. Whilst working at the RIKEN Yokohama Institute, I garnered a deep desire to focus on the field of Genomics and further my academic qualifications. I was accepted into the Tokyo University’s Medical Genome PhD program. My masochistic tendencies got the better of me and I applied to concurrently pursue McGill MBA Japan’s weekend program. Pursuing two graduate qualifications simultaneously was challenging to say the least. However, just like *Oshin*, I wanted to emulate a concept only perfectly defined in the Japanese language: “がんばります” - to keep trying with one’s best efforts despite the greatest of adversities. My view of this term is that amidst the demands of society, an individual continues to struggle to prove oneself and to deliver to the best of one’s ability.

Drawing inspiration from Japanese cultural icons

Like many foreigners, I struggled to comprehend the significance of many Japanese icons such as the cultural fixation on the Cherry Blossoms. Slowly but surely, its relevance to life became clear.

The Sakura provides remarkable symbolism as an icon of Japanese culture. Its metaphorical embodiment of the ephemeral temperament of life on this earth enabled me draw parallels between the sakura and my favorite classical piece: Beethoven's Allegretto from Symphony No 7; the latter typifies the Sakura's astounding beauty by its quick, short-lived but powerful resonance. I also further understood that albeit with nationalistic connotations, the Sakura represents humanity and mortality and the age-old Buddhist concept: 物の哀れ (*mono no aware*).

Another national symbol is the evanescent Cicada (蟬 or "semi"), which although considered by many to be a large contributor of noise pollution during the summer season, the Cicada epitomizes the quintessential Japanese concept of 無常 (Mujo). These creatures spend most of their elongated life cycles underground and regardless of weathering adversities such as snow-fall, droughts or floods, like the Sakura that year-after-year emerges to claim its limelight, the Japanese Cicada never fails to claim its moment of glory through its inexorable chirping whilst living its short-lived and fleeting life to the fullest.

Rising above the barriers and challenges

Redundant bureaucracy, gender inequality, age bias and other negative attributes are a few of the downsides that mar the magic of this country. Having worked in a Japanese organization and now being a full-time student, many of my observations prompt me to question how any individual could resist the pressures of this demanding society before inadvertently succumbing to its pressures and conforming.

Being a young female foreigner in a patriarchal country and qualifying in male-dominated fields of science and business, I anticipated challenges to come my way and I certainly received my dose! I grew to truly understand the Nietzsche quote that I had heard so often, "that which does not kill us makes us stronger." Fortunately, none of the challenges I was presented with proved to be insurmountable; I soon realized that the seeds sown in the face of such adversity have brought about some of the most rewarding fruits.

Despite the hearsay that foreigners are unable to break the cultural barrier into acceptance, I am proof that this is possible and foreigners in Japan could have equal opportunities. In 2009, after the scientific team I led as the CEO was awarded first prize for our anti-angiogenic fusion therapy business idea, Novartis selected me to represent Japan in the Global Biocamp in Boston. Having the opportunity to represent Japan internationally was a once in a life-time experience that gave me intense satisfaction. It allowed me to give back to the country that had opened so many doors for me. Appearing in Nikkei Business and Nikkei Medical Publications and being interviewed for a TBS Television press release were unique experiences. Japan has provided me with amazing opportunities and my travels within Japan allowed me to indulge in various aspects of Japanese culture that most in the world can only hear or read about. In 2008, I was awarded a scholarship by Otsuka Toshimi Foundation and had the opportunity to visit Osaka and Tokushima. Moreover, as a 2010 Honjo Zaidan Scholar, Shizuoka and Kyoto are cities I have been privileged to visit.

My view of Japanese culture today...

Undoubtedly, traditional Asian values such as respect for authority and elders are being tested. The occidentalization of Japan is inevitable as governmental and immigration policies accommodate acculturation and globalization. The popularity of Western culture in Japan is becoming increasingly visible both in the corporate world, with the way visionary CEOs are starting to govern their companies in a borderless world; and also in everyday culture where Western food chains, music and television programs pervade the Japan. And the ancient culture of *Oshin's* days is slowly fading...

I do not claim to be an expert on Japan and its culture, or Science or Business – quite the contrary. I am a novice that is slowly picking up on the nuances, still testing the waters whilst trying to grasp every opportunity for all its worth.

As a child, *Oshin* epitomized the essence of womanhood and today she remains an evocative symbol of perseverance. The 32nd Annual Molecular Biology Society of Japan Conference provided me with a life-altering experience. I met the 2002 Nobel Prize in Physiology/Medicine Laureate, Sir John Sulston. Our long and tangential conversation involved discussions on Bio-ethical mine fields, global treaties, equitable healthcare delivery, the disadvantages of data privatization, the necessity to increase corporate taxes, etc. In the midst of our conversation, I felt inspired to share a personal epiphany – that I have a penchant for altruism and, philanthropy rather than capitalism, alone. I care deeply about underprivileged women, afraid to aspire, who have never experienced true freedom, who try to break free but are victimized by social constraints. His response was simply: “Yes, the women in the Ganges have been waiting for someone like you.”

In retrospect, the aphorism “*Carpe Diem*” (or “seize the day”) rings true of my experiences in Japan thus far. Having chased my dream, my current challenge is to live the dream... Japan, a land of opportunity, allowed me to stretch myself in all directions. Yes, I could finally spread my wings – but could I fly?

The dream lives on...

My journey from the Land of the Long White Cloud to the Land of the Rising Sun is a story of self discovery, personal and professional development... With a venerable Japanese bow, I would like to express my eternal grateful to a land that continues to intrigue me, challenge me, teach me, equip me, and strengthen me. 大変お世話になり、誠に有難うございました。