

Kyoto International Cultural Association, inc.
34th KICA Essay Contest
Japan in the International Community, My View

Japan – what lies beneath?

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What is the image of Japan in the international community? Is it cliché or combinis, fact or fiction, Hello Kitty or Hondas? In trying to answer this question I first conducted a straw poll among my friends and family. I emailed them this question; “What you think about when you think about Japan? Answer in one word.”

First, what impressed me was the volume of answers and the speed at which people answered. Everybody was eager to answer. Of the cohort of about 30 or so respondents only three have visited Japan; the rest of the group have only ever experienced Japan from abroad. The range of answers is testament to what I call Japan’s “soft-power super-power status.”

The one-word answers ranged from delicious food to cleanliness, polite, etiquette-obsessed, sushi, vending machines, Nintendo, *umami*, technology, strict, the Japanese flag, the Shibuya pedestrian crossing, eccentric, robots, trains, temples, tradition, clocks, pink, Hello Kitty, good cars, pine trees and Mr Miyagi from the *Karate Kid* movies. In light of the events of 11 March in Tohoku others mentioned earthquakes and Fukushima.

Of course giving your impression of any country in one word, especially one with such a long history, such a rich culture and an international reach is always going to leave out far more than it includes. But nonetheless it serves as an interesting starting point.

Having lived in Japan for nearly two years I am going to add my own words to my friends ‘one word’ answers and try to construct a picture of what Japan looks like from inside and outside.

Before I came to Japan anyone of the answers that my friends thought-up could have been mine; well, except *umami*. Japan has taught me much about food. Indeed Japan’s appetite for food is matched by its love of talking about food; more often than not my conversations with Japanese people often revolve entirely around food.

I first encountered Japan growing up in Ireland in the 1980s during Japan’s economic boom. Japanese exports were common sights in my neighbourhood; there were Nissans and Toyotas and Panasonic made a memorable entrance in the form of a videocassette recorder. I can still remember that video machine in my neighbour’s house; it was gigantic in the way everything seems bigger when you are a child, it had row after row

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looked more like something from the future, something from space or something you would use to get to space.

In keeping with technology by far the biggest star of all, certainly the most coveted was Sony's Walkman. Imagine that you could walk to school listening to your own mix tapes—in fact, if you kept your head down and the sound low you could listen to your Walkman in class. It might sound quaint now in the digital era with Smartphones and MP3s as standard, but in my youth the Walkman was a touch of genius.

So like my friends who answered cars, robots, trains and technology, this is the Japan I first encountered—a country both far away and far ahead of Ireland, a place where technology came from.

While it was Japan's economic might I first encountered, this was followed more broadly by aspects of Japanese culture that have gained universal appeal. Young people today are as likely to encounter manga as they are Mitsubishi. The contemporary "Japan boom" has sent sushi global; Studio Ghibli movies are released in theatres across the world, manga's popularity has spread like a virus, everyone I know under 35 has a Murakami novel by their bedside, Harajuku is known as much for being a style as much as it is a place; Mario has joined Pac-Man as a global pop-icon; Uniqlo and Mujirushi are on high streets around the world and for a while you could not walk into a pub through out the world without being handed a microphone ahead of a drink and ordered to sing a karaoke song.

Japan is ubiquitous, Japan is cool, Japan is represented around the world in so many ways, and yet on first coming to Japan I never felt more disorientated. I was *that* tourist taking photos of chopsticks, slippers, vending machines, the replica food displays, face towels and of course toilets, much to the amusement of Japanese people. It is not surprising that the cumulative effect of all these sights and stimuli can be disorientating.

A classic example of this is a description from the introduction to a well-known guidebook on Japan. The author, clearly overwhelmed on arriving in Tokyo, sets out to describe his new perspective; it was, he says, like arriving to another planet. This is not the first, or I suspect the last time I'll hear this opinion, as if tourists regularly visit other planets thus allowing for comparisons. But, I appreciate the basic sentiments, if not the hyperbole.

It is worth noting that more than a century ago there was a similar "Japan boom" in the West. Following Japan's rapprochement with the international community in the 1860s Japanese artefacts were displayed across Europe to widespread acclaim. Van Gogh took inspiration from *ukiyo-e* prints for his series of plum tree paintings. For Oscar Wilde, Japan, witnessed through prints, fabrics, paintings and costumes represented a new "perspective".

Expressing his attitude to Japan Wilde wrote; "I feel an irresistible desire to wander, and go to Japan, where I will pass my youth, sitting under an almond tree in white blossoms drinking amber tea out of a blue cup and looking at a landscape without perspective."

Wilde, unfortunately, never did make it to Japan; had he, I hope someone would have advised him to bring sun cream for his porcelain skin and mosquito repellent for his long hours of wandering and pondering.

Back then Japan much like today had a powerful pull on the public imagination; it was exotic, inspirational and intricate.

In the age of the internet and the image we are familiar with two Japans; futuristic and ancient, crowded and lonely, cutting-edge and conventional, simple and confounding. The two-Japan perspective, at odds with itself, an elegant contradiction is the one which visitors encounter and one which has gained most traction around the world. Indeed, drawing on the sample of my friends' responses a similar picture emerges.

But what if these are not contradictory or paradoxical at all; what if they are just numbers in the same equation. What if they are complementary?

Take the car for example; we are all familiar with the might of the Japanese automobile industry and how they have led production and development of new technology to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century, but among all these cars Japan is bicycle-mad. Everyday I see wave after wave of cyclists on all manner of bikes; it even brightens up my morning seeing mothers ferrying kids, one on the back, one in the front, cycling to school. Yes, Japan loves cars, but it has not forgotten how practical the bicycle is.

No other country that I have been to has done so much to make the toilet a luxury destination; at first Toto's toilets used to baffle me; all those buttons to clean parts of my body that I didn't even know existed. But alongside these amazing toilets, or rather in the ground, are the bog standard Japanese toilets. These are easy to clean and easy to install. High technology exists side-by-side with practical utilities. Just as apartments and houses still retain a Japanese-style living room next to rooms to western-style rooms. At summer festivals men and women wear *yukatas* as well as sporting luxury designer bags. The list goes, high-school students learning to design robots as well as learning the rituals of tea ceremony or calligraphy. Living in Japan, I have learned that opposites can complement each other; it is even possible for them to exist in harmony. I hope it is anyway, as I am getting married this year to a Japanese woman.

On a broader societal level Japan has adapted to having two dominant religions; aspects of both are used for different ceremonies and rituals. This, especially coming from Ireland, is quite incredible; religions don't have to be defined against each other; rather they can co-exist in harmony.

But I am not suggesting that Japan is always zen, the utopia that Wilde imagined, people wandering from blossom tree to blossom tree drinking tea. Like anywhere else there are the anxieties and hassles of modern life, family, work, commuting—but at least the trains are nearly always on time and people do that nice thing that seems to have gone out of fashion nearly everywhere else in the world, queuing.

On 11 March we all witnessed the discord between nature and humanity when the earthquake and tsunami struck Tohoku.

In light of the tragedy and destruction in Tohoku and the fear generated from Fukushima, people around the world connected with Japan; this time it was a connection bigger than trade or even culture, it was a connection borne out of humanity, of a concern for others in the face of disaster, tragedy and anxiety. There has been in the months since a global outpouring of goodwill for Japan.

In such a time of extreme crisis it is a testament to the Japanese spirit and discipline that the social contract, a concern for others, for the group, for civility and for society was upheld with grace. There were no scenes of looting; instead the images were of people queuing of co-operation. Japan has been severely tested and challenged in the past; the strength of its people to overcome each crisis is truly admirable.

The Tohoku earthquake and tsunami also showed how Japan has changed; teams from all over the world came to provide disaster and humanitarian relief. At one stage up to 20,000 US armed forces were in Tohoku assisting in *Operation Tomodachi*. To say that the months, years ahead will be difficult is to understate the magnitude of the emotional and physical impact of the quake and tsunami.

Japan is a nation that keeps re-inventing itself, in appliances and gadgets, in manga, games and novels, in architecture and art. There is a depth to Japan which is humbling. In the days following the earthquake a Japanese colleague asked what was the reaction in Ireland to the events in the Tohoku. I remember telling her how people were concerned and compassionate, but also they were impressed, as was I to see how the Japanese people were so quickly pulling together. I told my colleague that I do not know how people in Ireland would act if something so devastating were to befall us. Really I don't know, but then afterwards I thought—we could take examples from Japan.

To return to my friends and family and their one word answers, I hope that as many of them as possible can come to Japan, if only to add more words to their impressions of Japan.

One of the things I love about Japan is how it makes the ordinary elegant. For instance in one of my favourite restaurants the staff always overfill your cup of sake so that it spills into the saucer beneath. Not only do you get more sake, (always good) but also the hospitality of the restaurant is subtly expressed. Or the *kusari-doi*- a simple elegant down pipe or rain chain. The simple function of draining rainwater off a roof is transformed into an understated yet magical performance.

I know that many of my friends want to come to Japan, and there are so many places that I would like to show them, the view of Kyoto from Daimonji, the mists gathering like smoke clouds on the Shimanto river, the countless wonderful restaurants and izakayas. And most of all I want them to meet the people behind their one word impressions; the people that make Japan Japan.

Entering through noren
A word of welcome, coy smile
A hot towel, joy