

Japan in the International Community: My View
Neither West nor East, but somewhere in-between



BOVEN, Thekla

Thinking about Japan within the international community, invites us to reflect on the place that Japan occupies within this group. The task is to analyze the nature and character of the links binding Japan to the foreign, and to understand the image that the country projects abroad. A country's image, or identity, is usually depicted through its economic, political, cultural or military situation. But these aspects are dynamic, so the already multi-faceted identity of a country becomes an even more complex, transitory concept, making a simple definition impossible. For this reason, I will portray a personal view of the "Japan-ness" I experienced since I moved in Tokyo a year ago.

I am not a specialist in geography, nor sociology or even international politics and affairs, but I started to get interested in the underlying ties linking different cultures, as I am about to start a Phd. thesis on the influences of mobilities on the architectural concept of place. Today's interactions are frequently and ubiquitously crossing social and cultural boundaries, I argue that a new imaginative geography is emerging, in which a situation of being "in-between" best describes the contemporary sense of location. I will here expose you to some of my thoughts on some effect of this straddling condition. Firstly, by reflecting on my situation I come to understand that individual identities are influenced by encountered places over time and progressively detach themselves from a deep sense of belonging to a single nation. As a consequence of the affect of places on people, I will demonstrate that in turn people are vectors reshaping a country's identities. Hence, people and places are interdependent; the action of places on people is brought back right in the places themselves.

I have a Belgian father and a Filipino mother. When I was a child, I lived in Belgium and would often visit my mother's homeland. At that time, people would often ask me whether I felt more Belgian or more Filipino. I was always startled and anxious about that question. All I thought about was just living, and never questioned my own identity.

With carelessness and innocence I simply replied that I was different from other Belgians, because Filipino culture was part of my daily life, and I would point the advantages of my situation as I benefited from exotic holidays. I most certainly felt I didn't belong exclusively to the Western culture or to the Eastern -I had both. As I was raised embracing two different cultures, it was impossible for me to relate exclusively to the country I was living in. Moreover, Belgium has its own inner identity crises: encompassing three communities (Flemish, French, Germanic), a long history of conflicts has divided its population, who identify with their community rather than their country.

As my traveling extended beyond a back and forth between my parents homelands, and brought me to every continent, pushing me to displace myself repeatedly, the feeling of disengagement from a single image of the country of my nationality became even stronger. After living in Canada for a year, I took a very fortuitous opportunity to settle in Japan. On this second experience of moving into a new culture, I realized how my environment would reshape my identity. After an acclimatization period, I adopted some aspects of Japanese culture, sometimes even without noticing it.

For instance, I have never been a sports fan and may still have to learn how to appreciate baseball, but I certainly understand the thrill of betting on sumo fights, while eating and drinking in the Ryogoku Kokugikan in Tokyo. Even though I could already use chopsticks before coming to Japan, now I even prefer them to cutlery, as I feel more relaxed and liberated by using only one hand to eat at table — it facilitates my multi-tasking student lifestyle of eating and reading at the same time. I had to learn it the hard way, but now I know: it is pointless to be stressed and annoyed about things you can't help. For example, in packed trains, you can either enjoy a free massage, plunge into your phone to check for the nth time your e-mails or Facebook, or you may simply dose off on the next shoulder to catch up some lack of sleep. Every time I go out of Japan, I just seem not to be able to leave behind this twitch of excusing myself while slightly bowing my head. Politeness has insinuated itself into my posture. Trust in people is probably my favorite Japanese quality. There are no worries of falling asleep in the street with your bag at your side, as no one would dare to dispossess you of your belongings. Once, I was particularly surprised to see a girl of maybe six years old taking the subway. After that a series of tragic events in Belgium, I grew up to feel alarmed at the sight of a little girl wandering off the streets on her own. I was reminded of that scene when on my last trip back in Belgium, I took the subway and had never realized

that compared to Japanese public transport, the Belgian metro is a dark and dirty place that projects a gloominess and sickly color on people's faces. As if Japan covered my eyes with an invisible distortion filter, the perception of the city I have been living in for 22 years has completely changed. These are just a few examples of how living in Tokyo instilled its Japan-ness into my way of being, and probably I still haven't realized the full scope of my transformation.

The need to adapt to a new environment pushes one to forget, or to alter old practices in order to conform to the current location. When I travel back to Europe, members of my family would notice some changes in my behavior -some Japan-ness came on to my identity. But all one can really do is incorporate a foreign culture into his lifestyle without ever fully absorbing it, as it is impossible to grasp and understand the entire depth of a culture; and thankfully Japanese are very tolerant towards gaijins' ignorance, clumsiness and mistakes. So an individual identity is shaped by the succession of past experiences and places visited. My identity is a combination of my growing up in Belgium, traveling to the Philippines, living in Canada and studying in Japan. From that point of view I don't see anymore why one would attach his sense of identity to the place of his origins, rather to where he has been, what he has done, and what he is going to do. Places act on people as they imprint on them the experiences of those places. So people carry places along within them. As a consequence of that hypothesis we could imagine a place called Japan that is not limited to the piece of territory shown on the map, but expands to where ever anyone who encountered Japan goes.

A melting pot of diverse cultures is also found within Japan. Situated at the periphery of East Asia, the country persistently oscillates between the influences of oriental neighbors and the appeal of Eurocentric hegemony. I am fascinated by how Japanese culture, despite its situation, has managed to keep a certain distance from the source to remain somewhat singular. Regardless of the importance of the foreign contribution, a Japanese touch was sometimes added: whether it is the country's affinity with the Chinese language, but not its faithful adoption that led the Japanese to invent its own system of writing; or the revisited Indian, Portuguese and Chinese dishes that constitutes everyday cuisine in Japan, namely kare, tempura, ramen. Inspired by Kakuzo Okakura's description of Japan as a beach on the far east of civilization that gathers stranded bits of culture originating from the west, or the east, I regard Japanese culture, as a recollection of the country's long history of interactions with the international community. And by a process of wrapping the foreign of its Japan-ness,

Japanese culture claims its proper identity as belonging neither to the West nor to the East, but takes a leaf out of both. So things that are considered as being typically Japanese, sometimes originated from ancient external sources. The Japanese culture is already international.

I particularly look up to Japan as a model to construct my own identity, because of the country's capacity to offer a place for diverse cultures to coexist and be juxtaposed on the singularity of its own territory. It is in similar ways that I understand how one should develop when displacing himself into a new culture. He should embrace the hosting culture and make it his own by applying the filter of his peculiar identity.

Japan can appear to be very hermetic and frenetic. The language is the most common and obvious barrier, but not an unbridgeable one. Japanese are very accommodating with a foreigners' limits, and extremely patient. The capital city's rhythm, is one I have more trouble to surmount. I have the impression that everything you do in Tokyo you do it one hundred percent, and it still doesn't feel enough. Working hours are long and intense, productive too, but work is simply endless, there is always something awaiting. Partying is also very exhausting. As working hours finishes late, the usual meeting with my friends would be around 8-9pm. Which, leaves us just the time to have a diner and a quick drink. Unless you go for the whole night and take the first train on the next morning -what usually happens as no one can afford the cost of taxis. And yet as it is so hard to find a matching free schedule with friends, that a whole night of enjoying doesn't seem enough. In turn resting time are also extraordinarily extended to a prescribed cure of a consecutive 13 hours sleep! My first 6 months in Japan were really hectic. I didn't realize the affect of Tokyo's tempo on my health, till I would burn out and simply close myself up for a day. I needed to find some of my old habits back, to balance with the load of novelty I had to face. And that is easily done in Tokyo.

Simple and common things, that reminds me of Belgium and my previous lifestyles, can be found anywhere. Like a piece of chocolate from Godiva at the corner of my street, or a coffee on a terrace in Kagurazaka, or some word of French here or there, no, in fact all around and often with funny misspellings! As the increasing mobilities of capital, goods, people, ideas, and images characterize our contemporary developed society, it is quite easy for a foreigner living in Tokyo, to find a similar lifestyle he used to have. The city of Tokyo, and therefore Japan includes every aspect of foreign cultures as well.

To resume, the key ideas I have advanced so far are: people are intrinsically

international as they travel, they carry a facet of places within them; Japanese culture is a combination and integration of external cultures; Japanese territory is filled with international communities.

To conclude, Japan is well connected to the international community, integrates foreign communities on its territory and has long intertwined interactions with foreigners. Yet the major international criticism about Japanese is that they are reflexively nationalistic. While nationalism is too often regarded as a negative quality because of its crude association to “a lethal mix of statist militarism, xenophobia, and racism”¹, I think a nationalistic view remains important, particularly in this era of globalization, in order to establish a clear platform on which diversity and interaction can occur. But what some may find hermetic in Japanese society comes from the Japanese people and their ways of marking the differences between themselves and the foreigner. What I came to believe is that when a Japanese points out that your Japanese is good, or that he is surprised by your dexterity with the chopsticks, etc.. it is because of his astonishment for your interest in his culture. I think Japanese people haven’t realized yet how influential and attractive they are abroad, and how in turn they are influenced by what lies outside themselves.

I hope this essay will make people reflect on their own identity, that is bound to be multi-cultural, as people travel more and more, places act upon people, and places themselves become globalized. After realizing this, we can all see ourselves belonging to the same place within the international community.

1 McVeigh, B. J. (2004). *Nationalisms of Japan: Managing and Mystifying Identity*. Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, Md.

