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CORE 350: Reflective Piece

Impossible Desires in the Land of the Rising Sun: An Outsider's View

Looking back at the many conversations I had during my stay in Japan, one exchange stands out in particular. My host family had just taken me out to an *okonomiyaki* restaurant, at which clients essentially prepare their own meals. When my host parents asked me what I thought of the meal, I replied that it was *omoshirokatta* (interesting or entertaining). At this statement, my host brother, Rei, declared that it “was not really interesting at all.”

“Well,” I said, “I’m not Japanese, so *okonomiyaki* is new to me. I find it interesting because we don’t have anything like it in America.”

“Do you want to become Japanese?”

“That’s impossible.”

“But do you want to?”

I hesitated before giving the only feasible answer: “No.”

He then proceeded to talk about how he could become an “*Eigo-jin*” (“English-speaking person”), and his parents were much amused at his usage of this nonsense word instead of the proper term, *Amerika-jin* (American). I do believe, however, that beneath this linguistic faux pas lies a greater significance. If Rei were to become an “English-speaking person” and move to America, he would essentially become American; this is oversimplifying the matter, but America is a country populated by immigrants and their descendants, and theoretically anyone can become an American. Becoming Japanese, on the other hand, is much more complicated, and not just in the legal sense, though obtaining the status of “long-term resident” in Japan is indeed a convoluted process. I could spend the rest of my life in Japan, but I would inevitably be marked

as a *gaijin* (literally “outside person,” a term often used to refer to foreigners). One never really becomes Japanese; one is only born so, but what makes a person Japanese in the first place?

Now, I will not define in this essay what exactly it means to be Japanese, for to do so is far beyond my abilities, and it would be presumptuous to think that I could do so after spending such a short time in the country. I will say, however, that one is either Japanese or an outsider, and this idea of *uchi/soto* (inside/outside) is crucial to an understanding of Japanese culture. It applies to both society as a whole and to subsections of it; for instance, family, friends, strangers, colleagues, and instructors all occupy different realms, and the type of language one uses with these groups differs accordingly (the varying levels of politeness in Japanese often cause it to be labeled one of the hardest languages to learn).

Japan is an insular country, both literally and figuratively. In the geographic sense, it is an island nation, and this undoubtedly aided in its figurative isolation as well. Its inaccessibility to most of the world for thousands of years allowed the country to develop its unique culture, and Japanese is often considered a language isolate. Perhaps, then, it is unsurprising that it should gain a mindset that the world is composed of two categories: Japan and the outside. Even after its opening to the Western World precipitated by Commodore Perry’s arrival, it has remained in several ways nationalistic and at times xenophobic.

Post-occupation, Japan underwent rapid modernization and globalization, and because of this, people often conceive of it as a “Westernized” nation. However, it is somewhat erroneous to say that Japan has adopted Western customs and culture; rather, it has borrowed traditions from the West and transformed them in such a way that they have become unrecognizable. For example, one of the most popular types of Japanese dining establishments in America is what is popularly referred to as “hibachi,” a highly stylized and often entertaining way of making steak.

What many people do not realize is that this type of restaurant, called *teppanyaki* in Japan, is actually an adaptation of the Western-style steakhouse; it is not actually considered traditional Japanese cuisine. However, the end product differs rather radically from the original, and this process of borrowing can also be seen in the country's abundant loan words (such as *anime*, from “animation,” and *tempura*, from the Latin for “time”) and its curious take on Christian-style weddings.

I mentioned before that Japan is in some ways xenophobic, and I would like to elaborate on this. Overt racism and negative stereotypes are not commonly applied to Westerners (the case is, however, different for Chinese and Koreans, who are often the brunt of long-seated negative sentiments among the three countries), and only once did I feel that I was being treated negatively because of my ethnicity—the perpetrators were elderly and living in a conservative area, and I wasn't so much overtly discriminated against as I was regarded with suspicion. On the contrary, I often felt that I was treated with more respect as a foreigner. Before going to Japan, I was often told that “they would love me there” by virtue of being an American, but I do not believe that it is because of a widespread affinity for the West that I was treated in such a way. Rather, it extends back to the concept of being an outsider, much like a Japanese person would address a stranger more politely than they would a friend.

Moreover, I was not expected to know the language and the intricacies of Japanese culture, and thus any mistakes I made were often regarded as harmless and predictable, like a newly bought puppy chewing on its owner's shoes. I was also granted access to things that might have been off-limits if I were a native, and this came in handy in several instances. For example, I spent a good portion of the semester making a documentary on Kabukichō, Tokyo's red-light district, which has strong *yakuza* (Japanese mafia) presence. The area on which I specifically

focused, Golden Gai, is notorious for its avoidance of media attention; indeed, signs forbidding cameras line the walls of the district. While several of the establishments did not allow foreigners at all, the ones that did let me in gave me freedom to film and explore my surroundings. There were thus times when the seeming innocuousness of being a 20 year-old American woman worked in my favor.

On the issue of stereotypes of Americans, I also felt that they were generally benign. I asked my host parents what they thought the typical American was like, and they replied, “Like you.” At first, I was somewhat offended, as I thought most foreigners stereotyped Americans as loud, ignorant, rude, and overweight—not exactly the most flattering traits. When I asked them to elaborate, my host father said, “Well, you were probably a cheerleader, right?” I found this tremendously entertaining, as I was about as far from a cheerleader in high school as one could get. As my host father continued, however, I began to see his reasoning: I was “blonde” (though my hair would almost certainly be considered light brown or auburn in America), blue-eyed, smiley, and fond of laughing. Having grown up watching *Beverly Hills 90210* and other American dramas, my host father’s image of the States was largely shaped by the media. The belief that all Americans are outgoing and friendly is not entirely accurate, but it is much more positive than the stereotype I had expected.

On a few occasions, I did encounter overly romanticized perceptions of Western culture. For instance, once while walking in Ueno Park, I was approached by a middle-aged man who asked if he could practice his English with me before beginning a bizarre monologue about the superiority of all things American. Similarly, I have known a fair share of Americans who have a blind love for all things Japanese while viewing their own culture with disdain.

Now, there is certainly nothing wrong with admiring another culture, and indeed, I maintain a fascination with the arts and culture of Japan. The dangerous aspect of this, though, is when it transforms into unquestioned worship, akin to the so-called “honeymoon phase” of culture shock. To simplify matters, I usually tell people that I had a wonderful and life-changing experience in Japan, but in reality it is much more complicated than that. Yes, it was a great opportunity, I learned a lot about myself and the culture, and I had many wonderful experiences, but at the same time, I often found my semester there challenging and at times frustrating. My commute to school took over an hour each way, and the financial strain of living in the second most expensive city in the world, coupled with the weakness of the American dollar, caused me a lot of stress. Everyday matters such as communicating became difficult tasks; while my language skills improved greatly over the course of my stay, they were still inadequate in many respects, and I had to cope with struggling to make myself understood. I began to adapt to my new circumstances—in some ways I am almost nostalgic for even the most mundane ones like the grueling hill I had to climb to get home—but they never really became easy.

What is important, I think, is to accept both the positive and negative aspects of another country’s society. There are many facets of living in Japan that I loved: the food was delicious, the shopping was wonderful, and the cities were incredibly clean. At the same time, I also found the role of women to be substandard; they only earn, on average, 65% of what men do, and that is if they choose to get jobs at all. Many women, such as my host mother, become full-time housewives despite having degrees from top colleges, and jobs are not readily offered to women. Moreover, although I found the people very hard-working on the whole, the educational and career worlds were not without problems. Children start attending *juku* (cram schools) at around nine-years-old, learning by rote memorization in order to pass their junior high school, high

school, and finally college entrance exams. This system leaves children overworked; my ten-year-old host sister Kate, for instance, had almost no free time between cram school, her regular classes, and the various extracurricular lessons she attended. Also, unlike in America, it is very hard to be a self-made millionaire or something of the sort; a man usually gets a job right out of college and rarely moves up the proverbial corporate ladder, instead remaining in the same position until retirement. There is also the phenomenon of *nomikai*, in which employers are expected to drink with their colleagues after hours as almost an extension of the job. Men often came back very late at night, or not at all if they miss the last train at 12 AM.

There were also, of course, a number of routine things that I began to take for granted, viewing them in a more neutral light. Little things, like the high-tech toilets and peculiar showers, had just as much effect on me as the overtly positive or negative experiences, and I think on the whole I had a very rounded stay, neither idealizing nor demonizing the country. One of the questions I was most frequently asked by Japanese people was how my image of Japan before going there differed from how it actually was. I was often unsure of how to answer this, because my ideas about Japan had been gathered from a number of sources (novels, movies, comic books, and scholarly works), so I did not have one coherent view of the country. One thing I had thought, though, was that Japan was a country where the very ancient and the ultramodern sat side-by-side, and I do not think Tokyo really fits into either category. Very few of the buildings in Tokyo date before the 20th century, and there are a number of reasons that could account for this. It has been ravaged by fires during the feudal period, firebombing during World War II, and devastating earthquakes throughout its history, leaving few of the original structures extant. Even perfectly fine buildings, however, are constantly torn down and replaced by new structures.

Despite the constant rebuilding, though, the architecture was not particularly sleek or modern like I had pictured it. Rather, culturally important structures have often replaced by drab, and somewhat dated, concrete buildings, which were not really meant to be permanent structures for future generations to marvel at. Some might attribute this to Japan's value of the present moment over the past or future, but a more pragmatic observer might notice that during the 1990s, the construction industry employed ten percent of the workforce in Japan, making it the country's largest industry. Constant construction was thus necessary if only to keep a large portion of the population employed.

Of course, I do not mean to imply that there are not places in Japan that embody the dichotomy of the past and future. I had the wonderful opportunity to live with a host family in Yokohama, the second largest city in Japan, located 30 minutes by train from central Tokyo. With a short, 150-year history as a city, Yokohama boasts impressive architecture, and it has attracted bright young minds from around the world in its attempts to become a "creative city." Another opportunity I had was to visit Kyoto, the imperial capital for more than a thousand years. Rife with ancient, awe-inspiring structures that give the viewer a sense of his or her own smallness, Kyoto embodies Japan's rich and long history every bit as much as Yokohama symbolizes its rapid progress. Kyoto is also something of a geriatric city: Japan has the oldest life expectancy in the world (no wonder, given the low-calorie foods and the amount of walking required to get around), and the birthrates have been declining for some time now, presenting the country with a population crisis.

As an outsider in Japan, I viewed the country from a unique perspective, and likewise, being in a foreign country allowed me to view my own place of birth from a new viewpoint, partially because I was constantly comparing the two. After living in the country for almost three

months, I was struck by how large everything in America seemed upon returning to my home country. America is geographically vast, and it is, in the most simplified terms, a country of big people who drive big cars and live in big houses. When my host family saw a picture of my house and found out each of our five family members owned a car, they remarked that I must be very wealthy. I assured them that my family was perfectly middle class, but the expanse of America both necessitates having a car to get around and causes land to be much cheaper. (To give you some idea of the cost of real estate in Tokyo, the tiny area of Ginza was at one point estimated to be worth more than the entire state of California, making it the priciest land in the world.) Unlike America, Japan has extensive public transportation that covers the entire country; it is often referred to as the most developed and reliable rail system in the world, and owning a car in Tokyo isn't so much a necessity as it is a status symbol. Japan's "smallness" had its perks—my 5'2" stature was considered average for the first time in my life, so I was able to find clothing that actually fit, and because of the smaller portion sizes and not having a car, I led a healthy lifestyle—but it had its downsides as well. Because of the small size of the country and its large population, overcrowding is a ubiquitous problem. I mentioned the amazing rail system in Japan, but one thing I will not particularly miss is how the trains run at 300% capacity during rush hour, which is both unsafe and, as I discovered on my daily commute, extremely uncomfortable.

Another contrast that struck me was how much quieter Japan was than America; while I rode the grossly overcrowded trains mentioned above nearly every day, I never once heard someone talk on a cell phone. In fact, one could almost hear a pin drop, and even when in conversation, people tended to be rather soft-spoken. Generally, the people were much more polite than in the States, and their respect and helpfulness certainly aided me during the many

times I got lost or had other mishaps. On one occasion, I lost my wallet, which contained the equivalent of \$230, my passport, my commuter pass, and my debit and credit cards, only to have everything returned to me promptly, and a similar situation occurred with my cell phone. Of course, it might be said that Japan's ruthless law and punishment system accounts for its low crime rate, but I do believe that respect for others played an integral part in my aforementioned experiences.

This pervasive politeness can also stem back to the idea of *uchi* and *soto* that I was discussing earlier, as the courteous reserve presented towards strangers and acquaintances is part of a public façade that one is expected to wear. Outside of one's immediate circle (i.e., family or close friends), a person is not expected to speak his or her mind, but is rather supposed to remain as polite as possible. This discrepancy between one's inner feelings and outer projections is known as *honne* and *tatemae*, and it caused me no small amount of difficulty during my stay. For instance, a Japanese person would immediately interpret the phrase "I'll think about it" as a polite way of flat-out rejecting someone. They are also more skilled at interpreting body language and other subtle hints, but coming from a much more straightforward culture, I had no such priming, and this led to misunderstandings and difficulties with my host family, school work, and other activities.

Besides being confused by the semiotics, I also struggled with the language itself, as Japanese is by no means an easy language. I often made mistakes in my vocabulary or accent, which Rei took great pleasure in mocking. Usually, foreigners are not actually expected to know the language that well, and I was complimented on my ability when I uttered even the smallest phrase. Even still, there were times when miscommunication complicated my homestay experience; for instance, I once thought my host mother said to meet her at the *keisatsu* (police

office) instead of *kaisatsu* (ticket office); another time, when I would be slightly late for dinner because of school, I apologized in a text message by saying *gomen*, and my host mother was offended that I used this casual form of apology to her.

Another question people frequently asked me was why I chose to study Japanese. I usually responded by telling them about my interest in Japanese culture and how I was considering working in the country after graduation. This question could be interpreted on a different level, though: Why on earth would a person study one of the hardest languages on earth spoken only in a small island country? Certainly, it was not the most pragmatic choice of languages to study, but then, my whole study abroad experience was not rooted in practicality. I ended up doing many things I would have never pictured myself doing: six months ago, if you had told me that I would interview one of my favorite critics about a red light district or have my film shown in a gallery installation, I would have laughed in disbelief. My experiences, both the good and bad, have been as edifying as they were unlikely.

When relating my experiences in Japan, I have often stated that my time there seemed like a dream, though not in the sense that it fulfilled a lofty ideal I had long held. Rather, looking back on it, my time there seemed fleeting and surreal, an extended moment in time. I was there long enough to view it as a new home, and I had joined a new family, attended a new school, made new friends, and adjusted to a new lifestyle, only to return quickly to my previous life. Thus, I find myself in something of an extended waking life, still wondering whether I had temporarily stepped through the looking glass.

I would like to elaborate on this idea of the fleeting moment, because I do believe that it is central to an understanding of the country and its seemingly idiosyncratic ways. It has often been noted that one of the key differences between Western and Eastern philosophies is that the

former is linear while the latter is cyclical. The West looks ahead at the future, anticipating the new year while holding equal respect for the past. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, one is born, dies, and enters an afterlife that extends towards an incomprehensible eternity. The East, on the other hand, centers on temporality, holding the beauty of the transitory moment to a high degree; when we die, we are reborn in a continuous cycle, until finally achieving nirvana, a heightened state of awareness. It is not incidental that cherry blossoms are considered a symbol of Japan, for they embody the concept of *mono no aware* (the transience of things). They remain on the trees for only a few days before dispersing across the ground, but it is this imminent death that imbues them with beauty, for everything that is beautiful is so by virtue of its impermanence. This fleeting beauty cannot last, much like a moment cannot extend beyond the tiny fragment of time it occupies. The cherry blossoms, however, are certain to return at the same time the next year, in a constant cycle of death and rebirth.

Thus, it is perhaps fitting that I should bring this essay full circle by returning to the conversation at the beginning. I had the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to interview the eminent ex-patriot critic and author Donald Richie as part of the documentary I was working on throughout the summer. As an icebreaker, I related the aforementioned exchange to him as emblematic of my homestay experience. He replied simply, “The key is not *wanting* to be Japanese.” Indeed, what merit lies in desiring for the impossible? To do so would be fruitless and misguided; moreover, for all my love of Japanese arts and culture, I do not think I could live in the country for my entire life: I could never conceivably view it as my home, because I will, in my heart, always be an American. That said, I know that I will return to the country someday, just as one cannot begin a great novel without finishing it. The final question I was often asked was the simplest one: Why did I come to Japan? My motives were multitude, and I know that if I

return again, I will go for different reasons entirely. I may never truly decipher the mysteries of the Land of the Rising Sun, but why would I want to? These mysteries constitute the intricacies of Japanese culture, and while I will continue turning each page of this figurative book with vigor, I don't believe I can ever close its covers for good.