

Kristen VanBlargan

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 11 week 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. We don’t have anything like it in America, so I find it interesting.”

“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). However, I do believe that beneath this linguistic faux pas lies 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 descendents, and theoretically, anyone can become an American quite easily. Becoming Japanese, however, is much more complicated – not just in the legal sense, though obtaining the status of “long-term resident” in Japan is indeed

an extremely convoluted process. One never really becomes Japanese; one is only born so, but what makes a person Japanese in the first place?

Being born in the country does not necessarily guarantee a person's status as being Japanese. Take, for instance, one of the students enrolled in Temple University's campus in Japan: she was a Caucasian raised by Japanese parents in Tokyo, but she was still considered a *gaijin*, a term that literally means "outside person" and is used to refer to foreigners. 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 only 11 weeks 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 reflects this (the varying levels of politeness in Japanese often cause it to be labeled one of the hardest languages to learn).

Japan is, both literally and figuratively, an insular country. 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 highly unique culture, and unsurprisingly, 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 literal opening to the Western World, precipitated by Commodore Perry's arrival at Kurihama Beach, it has remained in several ways rather nationalistic and at times xenophobic.

Post-occupation, Japan underwent rapid modernization and globalization, and because of this, people often think 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 often 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 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 very xenophobic, and I would like to elaborate on this. Overt racism and negative stereotypes are not commonly applied to Westerners (though the case is quite different towards Chinese and Koreans, who are often the brunt of long-seated negative feelings between the three countries), and only once did I feel that I was being discriminated against because of my ethnicity (the perpetrators were very old and living in a conservative area, and perhaps I wasn’t so much discriminated against as regarded with suspicion). On the contrary, I actually felt that I was treated with more respect by virtue of being a Westerner. Before going to Japan, I was often told that “they would love me there,” with my fair skin, blue eyes, and light hair, but I do not believe that it is because of an wide-spread 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 as such, 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 I might not have been able to gain if I were a native, which came in handy in several instances. For example, I spent a good portion of the semester making a documentary on Kabuki-cho, the red-light district of Tokyo which has a rather strong *yakuza* (Japanese mafia) presence; the area that I specifically focused on, Golden Gai, is also notorious for its avoidance of media attention.

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—I have always thought that the stereotype of Americans is that they are loud, ignorant, rude, and fat—not exactly categories I wanted to fall within. When I asked them to elaborate, my host father said, "Well, you're probably a cheerleader, right?" which I found tremendously entertaining—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 brown in America), blue-eyed, smiley, and laughed a lot. Having grown up watching *Beverley Hills 91210* 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 particularly accurate, but it is much more positive than the stereotype I had expected.

In fact, I encountered on a few occasions what might be termed a "Pinkerton Syndrome," so named for the character in Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*. Something about me is overtly

American, I suppose, and I was often told how much better America was from other countries, usually by people who had never actually visited it. Likewise, I have known a fair share of Americans who have a blind love for all things Japanese, believing everything there to be inherently superior.

Now, there is certainly nothing wrong with admiring another culture, and indeed, I maintain a deep-seated fascination with the arts and culture of Japan. The dangerous aspect of this, though, is when it transforms into unquestioned worship, similar 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 time 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 in exchange rates, caused me a lot of stress. Everyday matters such as communicating became difficult tasks; while my language skills were better than most students in the program to begin with and they improved greatly, they were still often inadequate in many respects, and I had to cope with misunderstandings and struggling to make myself understood. I began to adapt to my new circumstances, and in some ways I’m almost nostalgic for even the most mundane ones (for some reason I miss 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, among other things. At the

same time, I also found the role of women to be rather deplorable; they only earn 60% of what men do; that is, if they chose to get jobs at all, for many women, such as my host mother, become full-time housewives despite having degrees from top colleges because it is expected of them and jobs are not readily offered to women. Moreover, while I found the people very hard-working on the whole, I think there is something deeply problematic with the educational and career worlds: children started attending cram schools at 9 years old, learning by rote memorization in order to pass their college entrance exams, which leaves children overworked (I also don't believe this is the best form of education, but I am not an expert on the subject). My 10 year-old host sister Kate, for instance, had almost no free time: when she wasn't doing homework for regular school or cram school, she was off at some lesson or another. 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 working 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. My host father, for instance, often came back very late at night, or not at all if he missed the last train at 12 am. Meanwhile, my host mother would wait for him at home as his dinner grew cold, and while this sight was very sad for me to see, it is quite typical of Japanese families (getting to witness the family dynamics firsthand was one of the reasons I opted for the homestay).

There were also, of course, a number of mundane things that I began to take for granted, viewing them in a rather neutral life. 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 criticisms), so I didn't 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 20<sup>th</sup> century, and there are a number of reasons that could account for this. It has been ravaged by fires during the feudal period, devastating earthquakes, and fire bombs during World War II, 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 were often replaced by drab, and somewhat dated, concrete buildings, which weren't really meant to be permanent structures for future generations to marvel at. Some critics might attribute this to Japan's value of the present moment over the past or future, but a more pragmatic observer might notice that the construction industry employs 10 percent of the work force in Japan, making it the country's largest industry; constant construction is 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's architecture is very impressive, and it advertises itself as the "Creative City," attracting bright young minds from around the world. Another opportunity I had was to go to 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 that is required to get around), and the birth rates 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 also allowed me to view my own place of my 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 so very large upon returning to my country of birth. America is geographically quite 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 caused land to be much cheaper (to give you some idea of the cost of real estate in Tokyo, the tiny area of Ginza is estimated to be worth more than the entire state of California, making it the priciest land in the world) and necessitating having a car in order to get around. 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 necessary as it is a status symbol. Japan's "smallness" had its perks—my 5'2" height 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 slimmed down quite a bit—but it had its downsides as well. Because of the small

size of the country and large population, overcrowding was a ubiquitous problems. 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 extremely uncomfortable as I discovered on my daily morning commute.

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. On the whole, the people were much more polite, and at first I gushed incessantly at their constant respectfulness and helpfulness. This respect towards others and the law certainly aided me a lot during the many times I got lost or had other mishaps; on one occasion I lost my wallet, with the equivalent of \$230 in it, my commuter pass, and 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 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 partially 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 rather offended that I used this casual form of “sorry” to her (she always said it to me, and I figured it was acceptable in a text message, but I suppose I was mistaken).

Another question I was frequently asked was why I chose to study Japanese. I usually answered 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 founded 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 be interviewing one of my favorite critics about a red light district, having my film shown in a festival, or had a Nigerian stalker, 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, not in the sense that it fulfilled a lofty ideal I had long held (I think it has long been established that I did not exactly look at Japanese society through a rose-colored glass). Rather, looking back on it, my time there seemed quite fleeting and rather surreal, like 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 quickly return back to the status quo. Thus, I find myself in something of an extended waking life, still wondering whether my time spent abroad did indeed occur, or if 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, towards a new year, while holding equal respect for the past; in the Judeo-Christian tradition, one is born, dies, and enters an afterlife which extends towards an incomprehensible eternity. The East, on the other hand, is centered in the acknowledgment of 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 by accident that cherry blossoms are considered a symbol of Japan, as 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, and this fleeting beauty cannot last, much like a moment cannot extend beyond the tiny fragment of time it occupies. However, the cherry

blossoms are certain to return at the same time the next year, in a constant cycle of death and rebirth.

As such, 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.