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T. Albert Yamada

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INTRODUCTION

Japan: An Introduction

by T. Albert Yamada*

A n introduction to Japan must start with a warning to always keep in mind the intensity of the Japanese quality in Japan, that is to say, remember: Japan is Japan is Japan.

Japan is misleadingly Americanized or Occidentalized, as evidenced by dresses and business suits, tennis shoes, high heels, loafers; colored cars on modern highways; houses with tables, chairs, and beds; running hot water, air conditioning, telephone and television. Signs in English abound, and the Japanese language is sprinkled with Americanese. A foreigner need not speak Japanese—almost everybody knows some English. Staying at a major hotel in Tokyo is not much different from staying at a good hotel in Washington or Munich. It is not difficult for a visitor to feel that Japan is not very Japanese after all because there is so much American culture in Japan.

The appearance of the Americanization of Japan, however, is deceptively misleading. The fact is that they are essentially and inherently Japanese through and through. But, because they are extremely adaptable and are eager to adopt foreign ways, they appear to be less Japanese. The Japanese maintain only a thin veneer of Americanization (or Westernization). Underneath that veneer, Japan keeps its unique quality. It is essential to keep this fact in mind in trying to understand Japan, to do business in Japan or to work with the Japanese.

It is important to be aware of misconceptions and also to understand that the Westernization process of Japan is a recent phenomenon. Japan received its first European visitors many hundreds of years ago, but only in the 1850's with the landing of Commodore Perry did Japan finally al-

* Born and raised in Japan during the post-World War II American occupation, Mr. Yamada went from English-speaking missionary school to receive a B.A. in English at Elizabethtown College in Pennsylvania. Mr. Yamada is currently the Executive Vice President of Mike Masoaka Associates, a Washington, D.C.-based firm engaged in public and Congressional relations on behalf of American subsidiaries of Japanese multinational corporations.
low foreigners to enter and leave.

The relative newness of Western culture to Japan can be perceived from the manifestations of feudal times occasionally glimpsed in the preliminaries of a developing street fight, or when some macho male is trying to intimidate another. There are a lot of from-the-diaphragm, deep-throated rumblings and threats—quite difficult to do, and truly intimidating if done well. Much of this type of Japanese street behavior would be lost on a foreigner but it becomes understandable as part of the traditional kabuki plays or samurai genre movies. The past is not so far away in Japan. Tokyo may be modern but past history is still present and very close. Japan’s heritage and culture cannot be ignored because so much of old Japan remains tangible and palpable. Old farm houses, temples and shrines preserve the past and in a sense trap the Japanese in the essence of their being, in the quality of being Japanese.

Because it is an isolated island, Japan developed its own way of thinking and its own way of doing things. Even today, Japan remains very much a country that is psychologically self-sustaining, self-righteous, proud and defiant. Yet because it is an island with limited resources, limited escape routes and limited growth potential, its people are resourcefully and creatively adaptive, intellectually rigorous and flexible in attitude. They realize their shortcomings and have an inferiority complex toward the Western world, yet maintain a viewpoint of superiority. The novel Shogun shows how the Japanese were in awe of the English pilot’s technical skills but still considered him an uncultured outsider.

It is this two-tiered regard for foreigners that leads to misunderstandings and confusion. The thin veneer of Westernization makes a Japanese appreciate the scientist, technician or consultant, but the essential Japaneseness that gives him a sense of cultural superiority preserves a gap that can be neither bridged nor ignored.

Japan is a geographically small country about the size of Montana, certainly smaller than the state of California, but Japan has about half the population of the United States. Approximately 110 million people live in Japan, with about 10 percent living in the Tokyo area.

In Japan there is form, order and structure in virtually every activity. There has to be. There are too many people and not enough space. There is literally no room for someone who does not fit into an organized pattern. Everyone and everything must function in harmony and relation to each other.

That is why personal relationships are important in Japan. Getting to know a person’s character is more important than learning the person’s academic or professional credentials. In a closed community where everyone must work together, it is important to know the co-worker’s personality and to see if he/she is a kindred spirit. Dependability and responsibility are respected qualities.
For that reason, once a relationship is established, the Japanese will honor commitments. That is why there are proportionately fewer lawyers in Japan than in the United States. In Japan, the general principles of an agreement are more important than the details. Meticulous contracts and agreements are written but the spirit of an agreement is paramount; the Japanese do not run to court for every minor disagreement.

Moreover, the Japanese spend a lot of time getting to know a stranger. Casual meetings precede formal business meetings. The Japanese generally or traditionally will not rush into an agreement until they know the other person, company or product. They want to know whether the company representative is an honorable, dependable person. They want to know about the company’s reputation and what the company is likely to do in case of conflict or difficulty. Only after the Japanese become comfortable with the relationship do they try to talk business.

Because of the importance of a person’s honor and reputation, correct social and business behavior should be known. In Japan, group effort is more important than individual stardom. People who draw too much attention to themselves are not liked. In business meetings, the Japanese do not care for people who talk too much, or for the high-pressure salesman. The Japanese mistrust such people, believing that the person must be trying to mask something by talking so much. Silence is valued in Japan. In a business meeting, allowing appropriate silent moments to take place is important; it is not necessary to fill every minute with words, even when one suspects that the Japanese side has not understood what has been said. Being too eager is also not a desirable trait. The Japanese prefer a certain amount of dignity, self-control, poise and restraint.

The word “restraint” probably best describes almost everything in Japan. Not everything in Japan is made or done in good taste or with restraint or with dignity. However, there is always the desire in Japan to accomplish something without too much flair and without too much noise, but with dignity, poise and restraint.

Taking personal responsibility is important, even though group effort is stressed. It is within the context of the group that personal responsibility must be exercised, with each individual doing a share of the work and without causing difficulty or embarrassment to others. Because the individual must work with personal responsibility in relation to others within a group, many decisions in Japan are made slowly. Quick results should not be expected because a consensus must be reached in the decision-making process. No one who is in a position to be included must be left out from the process; when the decision is reached, it is a group determination.

For a foreigner looking for a decision or an answer, the Japanese language can be discouragingly diffuse. The word はい or “yes” means both, “Yes, I hear you and agree” and, “Yes, I hear you.” The foreigner is likely...
to think that a Japanese "yes" is a consent when actually the Japanese is only acknowledging having heard a statement, and thereby is avoiding making a commitment one way or the other.

To further confuse the situation, the Japanese generally believe that if something is explained clearly enough, the other side (i.e., the foreigner) will "understand." Unfortunately, the Japanese concept of "understanding" is the same as "agreeing." In other words, if the person understands, then the person also will agree because the Japanese believe that if someone can "understand" a given position then that person will agree with it if the understanding is real and deep. This thought process causes problems, however, because when a Japanese explains something in detail, he is asking for an understanding. The foreigner will listen and understand, but will not necessarily agree. The Japanese says, "If you put on my shoes, you will see that it hurts and that I cannot walk." The American says, "I can put on your shoes and see that it hurts, but I don't agree that you can't walk. I think you should walk even if your shoes hurt."

Finally, cooperation and harmony are important. Again, because there are so many people in Japan, maverick behavior cannot be tolerated. To the outsider, for example, the cooperative arrangements between some Japanese business communities look suspicious. That is because the Japanese are pragmatic and see issues in grays, rather than in black and white. The Japanese see and appreciate inter-connecting and interdependent relationships in a better light than Americans, who see individualistic, creative and innovative effort as superior to regimented group activity. The Japanese, on the other hand, see the need for order and are willing to work within a framework to achieve a goal that is beneficial to everyone. That is why the Japanese business-government relationship is seen by Americans as too cozy and devoid of competition. In fact, Japanese society is intensely competitive. After all, with so many people in a small country, only the best can survive; the competition to be the best is relentless and fierce. Only the Japanese can hide so much competition behind a mask of order and restraint.

To understand Japan is to realize that the country is truly unique; its noticeable mantle of Americanization is just that, a cloak. It is also essential to realize the uniqueness of the American people, and to know that solutions and truth between the two countries spring from working together, not from merely comparing or studying the differences.