The Japanese People From A Foreign Teacher's Perspective

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I should begin with one disclaimer: the subject of my lecture, "The Japanese People From A Foreign Teacher's Perspective," is completely unbounded. There's no one particular place to begin or end, no particular sub-topic I must include or omit. I'm not, moreover, a sociologist or social psychologist by profession, so I have nothing theoretical to offer from either of those disciplines. What I can offer instead are the observations and experiences I've gathered over the thirty years — half a lifetime — spend in Japan: a random sample, at best, of impressions and lessons learned about this country and the people I've lived among.

I first came to Japan in 1973, as a Visiting Professor at Hirosaki University, in Aomori Prefecture. I knew next to nothing about Japan; the only reference I could find to Hirosaki in my local library in the United States told me that it was noted for its apples. "Well, all right," I said to myself, and off I went to the snow country — speaking, of course, not a word of Japanese. I brought a beginner's book with me, and a collection of tapes, and as soon as I arrived I set about earnestly to learning the language. None of my effort lead to any successful communication: the people in Hirosaki seemed to be speaking another language entirely, and it took about half a year before I realized there was a local dialect, Tsugaru-ben, utterly different from the standard Japanese I was studying.

I like learning languages; since I was to be in Hirosaki for two years, I thought I ought to learn some of this dialect as well, and found that it was full of "fossil" Japanese: words and expressions, some of them from the Manyoushuu period, over a thousand years old, that had somehow survived in this remote part of the country. I've forgotten most of the Tsugaru-ben I learned, but I still remember the delight of discovering how it connected the people of the region to centuries of history and cultural tradition.

To digress (this talk will actually be a series of digressions): one of the reasons I like learning languages is that words do far more than denominate things: they reveal the essential patterns of thought, the cultural values, of the people who use them. Consider for example the word *sumimasen* , which you all probably use a dozen times a day, more or less reflexively, in a whole range of contexts, to express thanks, apologies, regrets or what have you. When I was first learning Japanese and came across this word, I went to the dictionary, and found that one character for *sumu* meant"to come to an end" — so that *sumimasen* could literally mean something like "this isn't the end of it." I wondered about that, and it lead me to the observation that Japanese culture is full of never-ending social interactions.

A goes off on holiday, and brings back a souvenir (*o-miage*) for B. "Ah, *sumimasen*," thinks B, and gives A something in return. "*Suman' naa*," thinks A, and sends B the traditional shochuu mimai summer postcard, B, of course, must then send A the winter *o-seibo* gift, and B must reciprocate the next summer with a present for *o-chuugen*. Start something like that, and it really never ends. At worst, these obligations can be oppressively sticky; at best, they reflect a uniquely Japanese concern for the importance of long-standing social relationships.

Another digression, on the cultural connotations of language: consider the word in Japanese for "widow." If you transliterate the three characters for miboujin, what you get is "not-yet-dead-person." How would a feminist interpret this? "Your husband's gone," is the subtext: "what business have you got, still hanging around?" Whether Japanese people are conscious of this or not is beside the point: the word still reflects the low esteem that traditional Japanese culture affords women.

In all the years I've taught at universities, it's been my women students who consistently get the best grades. I would argue that this is not merely because they work harder: women are basically smarter. They are more individualistic in their thinking than men, have more intellectual curiosity, more imagination, broader vision, less resistance to new ideas. I don't make this argument as a feminist, but rather to raise its important economic implications. Japan's future clearly lies in its knowledge-based businesses and industries; for that economy to thrive, it has to make the fullest and most efficient use of its human resources. And what proportion of upper-management positions in Japanese companies are held by women? Something like 3%. Globalization can only make the competitive environment for those businesses more severe; if they fail to develop the potential of all those intelligent, capable women in the workforce, eventually they are doomed to fall behind.

In that regard, the fact that Josai International University has established Japan's first graduate degree programs in Women's Studies and Gender Studies contributes in no small measure to its growing reputation.

I return to Tsugaru for one more digression — or two. My own field of specialization is Literature, and from that perspective I know something about the importance of place — the concrete particulars of local culture, language, customs, material traditions, folkways — to the literary imagination. The literature I love most grows out of the soil, and derives its universal appeal from that. In Japan today, however, mass communications are rapidly wiping out what survives of local cultures. Young people no longer use their local language (and don't speak standard Japanese very well, either). Wonderful old Japanese houses are condemned for their "inconvenience," torn down, and replaced with tasteless, character-less modern prefabs. Wherever you go now in Japan — even in Tsugaru — character is disappearing, and the texture of everyday life all seems the same.

Local culture, where it survives, preserves not only customs and material traditions, but ethical values as well. One day in Hirosaki, I saw an elderly lady in kimono stand at the door of an elevator in a department store — an automatic elevator — and bow as she got in. I hadn't been in Japan very long then, and I thought this was amusing, but later I realized how significant it was, as a gesture of gratitude: kansha no shirushi. "I don't know whom I owe, for not having to climb all those stairs, but I am grateful": that's what she was saying with that bow. If there is one thing more than any other I feel missing in my own culture now, in the United States, it is this ethical sense that whatever we have, whatever we have achieved, is not entirely our own doing. We have debts of gratitude to acknowledge, and that sense of obligation should play a part in the language and interactions of everyday life — as they do in Japan, even if they are sometimes only superficial.

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When my two-year contract at Hirosaki University was up, I left to take a job at the Japan Foundation in Tokyo, the government's umbrella organization for the funding and planning of a wide range of cultural and academic exchanges between Japan and the other countries of the world. I was the Foundation's English editor, and one day I noticed that letters going out from the Executive Director's office lacked the customary set of initials at the bottom, to indicate they'd been typed by one of his secretaries. I pointed this out to my section manager: without the initials, it might look like however had written the letter was not high enough in the organization to have his own staff. "We'd better tell the typist about this," I said — and the section manager's reply was astonishing. "That might be a bit sudden," he said. "The typist will feel bad about it. Why don't you just add the initials, gradually, when you send the letters back with your corrections, and sooner or later she will catch on." "Sooner or later?" I said. "And in the meanwhile, it's ok if the Director loses face?" Apparently so: it was more important not to confront the typist with a sudden change.

It has struck me ever since, how emblematic that exchange with the manager was, of the national character in general. The Japanese have the same enthusiasm for things new and different as anybody else, but the ground has to be prepared for them: to a remarkable degree, people in this country hate surprises. We all have some difficulty coping with the unanticipated sudden changes in our lives, whether for good or ill, but the Japanese seem to cope less well than others; they like to see things coming a long way off.

Consider how much sheer information you get here, in the course of the day — much of it gratuitous. The commuter trains announce every stop, and tell you on which side of the train the doors will open. Most people would be perfectly happy to discover for themselves, when the train came to a stop, how the doors will open — but for the Japanese, who really want to know well in advance what will happen next, there’s never too much of this sort of information.

To put that in another perspective, the Japanese seem to lack a certain love of adventure. That strikes me as unfortunate, because so many of the best things that have happened to me, the things that make me feel glad to be alive, have been unexpected; very few things I’ve done without making plans or predictions — just jumping off the platform at Kiyomizu, so to speak — have brought me any regrets. The same holds true for most of my closest friends abroad: somewhere in middle age, they decided that they could see too clearly what lay ahead on the trains they were riding, jumped the tracks, and went off in utterly different directions — and have been happier ever since.

Most people in Japan, on the other hand, seem content with established patterns to their lives — nursing in secret an undefined need for things to be different. Apart from the rest of my own career, I’ve done a lot of freelance writing since I came to Japan, for newspapers and magazines. I remember, early on, taking a proposal for a weekly column to one of the English-language newspapers in Tokyo, and showing it to the assistant editor — who was Japanese. “Let’s go downstairs to the coffee shop,” he suggested, and talk about this.” We did, and while we were discussing the column he suddenly said: “You know, I’ve been working on this newspaper for 20 years — and I haven’t any idea what it’s all been for.” It was an astonishing moment: here was a man who felt such a lack of meaning and purpose in his life, and kept it so bottled up inside, that he had to confess it to a complete stranger.

True, that was an unusual instance. But I suspect that the great majority of the people I’ve met over the years in this country live much the same way, without ever doing anything really adventurous, accepting their futures as inevitable because it is so difficult even to imagine other possibilities. “You start at Point A, and the only way to get to Point B is on this path, one step at a time”: that seems to be the way people in Japan are trained to think. Do it this way, and you're safe. Do it this way, and you will encounter no surprises. Do it this way, and you can predict the results.

I put the blame for this on the public education system, which establishes such a powerful mind set − a lockstep − on young people in this country, that by the time they leave school or go to university it is almost impossible to break. Let me illustrate with a *kanji* puzzle.

Write six “mouth” radicals (口) on a piece of paper, and ask people to form *kanji* with them by adding an element (*hen*) only on the left side: nothing above, below, or inside. There are, in fact, only six answers: 和 , 知 , 加 , 如 , 釦 , and 扣 . The last two are no longer in everyday use, but the first four are completely common − yet most people have great difficulty finding them. I sprung this puzzle once on a friend called Kazuo, and after struggling with it for ten minutes he still couldn' t come up with the character in his own name. Why is this puzzle so hard?

Because everyone learns to write kanji from left to right, in a fixed order of strokes. Thinking of them backwards, from right side to left, is unexpectedly difficult. The thrust of education in Japan, in general, seems much the same kind of thing to me: from first step to last, it teaches you that there is only one correct, acceptable way of doing things. There is plenty of minute attention paid to the details of process, and very little opportunity to see anything in larger perspective. This is right, that's wrong. This will come up on entrance exams, so you have to learn it; that won't come up on entrance exams, so you can ignore it. The result is that the Japanese are second to none in the world at dealing with clearly defined problems, at getting one step at a time from a starting point to a clearly established goal − but cope far less well than people in other cultures with jumping from Step One to Step Ten, with choosing from among a number of possible paths to the goal, or with the prospect of getting lost en route.

Getting lost en route, however, is not necessarily a bad thing: often, the most important discoveries we make come when we've taken an unexpected turn on the way to a very different goal. Might that account for the fact that, for all the effort Japan puts into education in mathematics and the physical sciences, there are so few Japanese Nobel prizewinners in those fields? The kind of outstanding, ground-breaking work that wins Nobel Prizes requires the free play of the imagination, the ability to see a particular problem in a larger or unconventional perspective.

Putting pure research aside, it seems to me that the education system and its mind set eventually has to work a real detriment on the Japanese economy. A generation ago, in the “miracle” period of double-digit growth, Japan essentially had an industrial economy; moving one step at a time towards predefined goals, the ability to focus single-mindedly on predictable outcomes, served the country well. Today, Japan has a service and knowledge-intensive economy, and flexibility of mind has become essential.

I can’t count the number of times the following has happened to me: I go into a café or a coffee shop, and order a cola float. The waiter or waitress apologizes profusely, but it seems that they don’t have a cola float on the menu.

“Is that so?” I say. “Do you have cola?”
“Oh, yes, sir.”
“And do you have ice cream?”
“Certainly, sir.”
“What would be the matter, then, with putting a scoop of that ice cream in a glass of cola, and bringing me a float?”
“I’m so sorry, sir. We don’t have cola floats.”

If the service industry can’t manage a bit more flexibility than that, it seems to me that the country’s future is not very bright.

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Let me digress back now, for a few last observations on the subject of language. My wife is Japanese, and whenever we go out together, my very existence is canceled. We’re on a trip somewhere, for example, and at the information counter in the railway station I ask for directions, or about a change of trains — in what I know, beyond any doubt, is grammatically correct, unaccented, uninflected, idiomatic Japanese. If I were doing this on the phone, the listener would have no idea that I was not, in fact, a native speaker. The person behind the counter, however, won’t even look at me — and answers my wife. I often lose my temper about this. “Look, you,” I say (deliberately letting my Japanese get rough and colloquial); “you heard me ask you the question. If I can speak your language, I can sure as hell understand it when you answer. Do you have any idea how rude it is to ignore me?” Whereupon he bows and apologies — to my wife.

I could add any number of bizarre examples, of the responses people have to foreigners speaking their language. I get into a taxi, and tell the driver where I want to go; nine times out of ten, the first thing he will say is *Nihongo o-jouzu desu ne* — "Your Japanese is very good." He has no idea of the actual extent of my Japanese, of course: he's just making conversation. If I answer with "thank you," or "oh, no, not really," or something similar, we can then have a pleasant if limited exchange until I get to my destination. Once in a while, however, just to make mischief, I'll respond to his opening gambit with *oyobazu nagara* — "with my poor ability" — an extremely formal disclaimer the Japanese will hardly ever use even amongst themselves. At which point the driver freezes — "oh, hell: this strange foreigner really CAN speak Japanese" — and doesn't say another word for the rest of the trip.

Why is that? Why is a foreigner who speaks a merely competent, acquired level of conversational Japanese some one you can relax with, but a really fluent foreigner, one whose Japanese suggests he might really understand your culture and the way you think, a threat? A foreigner, it seems, is a *gaijin* — an outsider — and when push comes to shove he's expected to stay that way. I think there's a peculiar complex at work here, which I can best explain in the context of police detective dramas on television.

My wife teases me a lot, about my fondness for these things, but I find popular entertainment a trove of information about the cultural values and attitudes of the people who watch it, and the detective drama is a case in point. Police detectives on Japanese TV work as a team, and the composition of the team is pure convention. There is the section chief — deliberate, a bit sober and severe (*shibui*), the effective leader and veteran professional. There are the two "cool" young detectives, who dress in the latest styles, wisecrack, and do the hard-boiled action scenes. There is the female detective, bright-eyed and helpful. And then there's the *ojisan*; older, a bit worn down by the cares of his work, passed over for promotion, but always there when you need him for an insight or a kind word.

It's the *ojisan* who always gets to deal with the young suspect, the tough kid in trouble. He's not really a bad kid, mind you: he's just had a hard time, and he's wearing his toughness and defiance like an armored shell. As the program moves to a climax, there's a point where the old detective says to him, "I understand just how you feel" (*anata no kimochi wo youku wakarimasu yo*) — and the kid melts: that tough veneer falls away; he cries, and the essential goodness underneath emerges in confession and repentance.

As often as I see it, I'm always struck by how Japanese this scene is. I believe that all the people I've met in this country in my thirty years here — nay, the people I haven't met as well — all have a deep abiding need, in their heart of hearts, for somebody to say exactly that to them: "I understand just how you feel."

It's very difficult, in the tenor of everyday life in Japan, to express your honne — your real feelings. From the moment you leave home in the morning to the moment you return at night, you are forced to be constantly aware of how other people perceive you and what they think of you; you're always under some kind of pressure to do what's expected. This is a society where "I understand just how you feel" carries a special resonance, because of the implied promise in it: the promise that the speaker accepts you for who and what you are, that he/she passes no judgment.

Of course, you don't have to be Japanese to want somebody to make a promise like that; the appeal is universal. But it's peculiarly Japanese to believe that nobody but one's fellow-Japanese could ever make such a promise and mean it — that nobody else understands just how they feel. That, I think, is what's behind the instinctive shrinking from foreigners who speak Japanese at native-speaker level: this might be an exaggeration, but by implication they are making a promise they can't really keep, that can't be trusted. Their command of the language suggests that they might really understand, but they are foreigners, so of course they can't. This seems to me to have a lot to do with why Japan tries so hard, in general, to keep foreigner's at arm's length.

I think that's a doomed effort. The latest census figures indicate that the non-Japanese population of Japan is already over 1% of the whole. Given its rapid ageing and low fertility rate, it's been estimated that Japan will have to admit upwards of 60,000 immigrants a year, merely to maintain its working population at present levels. This is not a gastarbeiter solution: those 60,000 foreigners will have to be able to raise their families here, to qualify for permanent residence and look forward in due course to citizenship, to find jobs in whatever niches of the economy will make best use of their talents and energies, to adapt and integrate. The process is unlikely to be friction-free, but it's not hard to imagine that the Japanese of this generation, or their children — and almost certainly their grandchildren — will have those immigrants as neighbors, as co-workers, as marriage partners. Eventually, their will be substantial numbers of people of other ethnicities who — *oyobazu nagara* — who have grown up with Japanese, speak it as well as you do, and really can understand just how you feel. Japan's very survival as a society, it seems to me, depends on affording that possibility a decent welcome.

外国人教員の目から見た日本人（要旨）

ジャレド・ルバスキー

1973年に初めて来日して青森の弘前大学に赴任した当時は、日本についてアメリカの大学の図書館で調べた知識といえば、りんごの産地で有名ということぐらいであった。日本語を学ぼうとしても、津軽弁という方言を人びとが話しているので驚いた。自分の学習している日本語と全く違う言葉だったからである。しかし、人びとの暮らしは歴史と文化的伝統に満ちていた。

私が外国語を学ぶのが好きな理由は、それが人びとの思想や文化的価値観を明らかにするからである。自分の専門分野である文学では、地域に特徴的文化は文学的イメージをほうふつとさせる点で大変重要である。

日本交流基金で働いていたときの事である。タイピストが上司の手紙を代筆してもイニシャルをつけない習慣に驚き、正そうとしたが、上司はそうした突然の変化でタイピストを驚かせてはならないと主張した。これはこれまで通りのやり方をくずさない日本文化を象徴的にあらわしていると思う。日本人が冒険を好まないのは不幸であると考える。アメリカの友人たちも、自分もそうであるが、人生の途中で、先が見えてしまうのはつまらないので、全く違った人生を選び取って幸せになっているが、日本人はレールに沿った人生を好む。たとえ、その意義や意味が判然としなくても、同じ仕事を続けている人がいる。

それは日本人が受けている教育によるものと考える。漢字は常に左から右に書くよう習うので、〈へん〉で考えることに慣れている日本人には〈つくり〉の方から漢字を思い出すゲームは全く苦手である。数学や自然科学教育に熱心な日本から独創性のある研究者が出ない理由もここにある。先行きの読めない経済の現状では、日本人には知識経済と柔軟な思考が重要である。しかし、日本人にはそれが苦手である。たとえば、ウェイターにコーラフロートを注文すると、大いに恐縮してその品は無いと断る。そこで、コーラとアイスクリームはあるか？と尋ねると、両方ともあると答える。それでコーラフロートが出来るではないか、と聞いても、メニューに無いものは作れないと慇懃に断られるという経験を何度もした。

私は日本人と結婚し、日本語もかなり話せるようになった。しかし、妻と外出すると、私が日本語で話しかけても相手は、妻に向かって返事をするばかりである。これはどうしたことだろう。外国人はガイジン（アウトサイダー）なのである。30年住んでいても。日本に在住する外国人が人口の１％を超えた現在、日本が少子高齢化社会の問題を抱え、年間６万人の移民を迎えようという時代である。近所に住む人、会社の同僚、結婚の相手として生活していく人びとである。この人びとを暖かく迎えることが出来るか否かに、日本が生き残れるチャンスはかかっているのだ。