

Japan No More

Just about one and a half centuries ago, Japan had been isolating itself from much of the world for over two hundred years during the Tokugawa Shogunate. Nevertheless, with the arrival of Commodore Matthew Perry who compelled the opening of Japan, Japan has changed. It's once profound culture has changed. This homogenous island country has quickly gone through industrialization, modernization, and westernization. The people of Japan have all forgotten the beautiful Japanese traditions and have rather become addicted to the western world, imitating it to a point which has become ridiculous.

Kimono—a Japanese word any foreigner would know. But who wears them these days? Perhaps it is only the geishas and maikos in Kyoto and kabuki actors who still wear kimonos on a daily basis. After the World War II ended, the United States sent western clothes as one of the many supplies since the clothes industries and markets of Japan blanked out with the war. This is the start of when wearing western clothes had become natural in Japan but all before that, women wore kimonos or yukatas, lighter versions of kimonos, and men wore hakamas, male kimonos, or jinbeis which were male versions of the yukata. Now when walking outside the streets of Japan, it is almost impossible to find someone wearing any kind of Japanese traditional clothing. But instead, people are wearing jeans, t-shirts, and sweatshirts—just like all the other westerners and now everyone else in the world.

While western clothes has become normality in Japan some group of people have taken the mimicking a little too far and it is simply weird. Just look at the streets of Harajuku and Shibuya in Tokyo. The fashion in those two districts is simply astonishing and people are just “creative” and “unique”. During my visit in Tokyo, I encountered many people who I could not keep my eyes off. There were the Lolita people who dressed them self in clothes influenced from the Victorian era yet also adding the gothic taste into it, while others dressed like 18th century aristocratic women like Marie Antoinette—all frilly and lacy with the parasol. Remember the *yamanba* peaking its popularity in the year 2000? On the Tokyo subways, everyone was staring at the two *yamamba* girls sitting as though they were surprised by the fact that these species still even existed. The *yamanba* people have taken the Japanese fashion way beyond the Japanese

beauty of simplicity and *wa* to a whole new level of standing out in public. In *yamanba* fashion, a deep tan is combined with hair dyed in shades of orange to blonde or a silver gray known as "high bleached". Black ink is used as eye-liner and white concealer is used as lipstick and eyeshadow. False eyelashes, plastic facial gems, and pearl powder are often added to this. The *yamanba* make up is an exaggeration of how these girls wanted to emphasize the depth and highlights of facial features, using white concealers and tanned skin with dark foundation and to extend the length of typical short Japanese eyelashes, in order to look more like western faces.

Japanese cuisine is healthy. True. But only traditional Japanese Buddhist cuisine is healthy. In the olden days, people of Japan relied on agriculture, especially rice, or even further dated, acorns and chestnuts, and were not hunter-gatherers catching hares and deer. Also, with Buddhism being introduced into Japan, there was a long age where meat was banned from eating. Therefore, their basic diet was rice, tofu, vegetables, and seafood. Very healthy. However, when eating meat was finally legalized and the fast food chains opening in Japan, the food we eat has changed greatly. Current days, metabolic syndrome has become a major problem in Japan and it is a disease when a person has too much body fat that it could lead them to life threatening diseases. Based on a research conducted by the Japanese government in 2008 over 15% of women aged 50 or more and over 52% of men aged 50 years or older are in danger of this lifestyle disease which increases the risk of cardiovascular diseases and diabetes (Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare).

With so much western influences diving into Japan from the coastlines, the way of architecture has also changed significantly. Traditional Japanese houses were built of wood and supported by wooden pillars with the beautiful roofs with Japanese roof tiles called *kawara*. Some of these traditional Japanese style architecture can still be seen today, many which attract thousands of tourists each year, whether it may be houses or temples in Kyoto, Kamakura, and Nara. Also throughout Japan, there are remaining castles from the shogun era which also acts as one of the beautiful remnants of Japanese culture. For over 600 years the rooms of these buildings were all Japanese style rooms with floors neatly packed with straw *tatami* mats. These *tatami* mats shine its beautiful greenness in *wa* with the greenery of traditional gardens with trees, bushes, ponds, and *bonsai*. *Tatami* is just great. It is not only the light green colour that's pleasant

to the eyes but also the smell of the straw, or *igusa*, is also special. Research has proved that the scent of *igusa* actually enhances concentration and resulted in better testing grades of children. This is because of the mixture of aroma components of vanillin and phytoncide creating a relaxing smell like vanilla and the fresh smell as though walking in the wood (Morita You).

However, recent years looking around the residential areas of Japan almost all of the house are western style homes shapes like the square and triangle on top or the thirty-floor high apartments where all the interiors are fixed with western furniture. All on top of that many of these houses today don't even have a Japanese style tatami room any more and rather use that space to create another bedroom for their child. Japanese traditional architecture has collapsed and has been reconstructed by western homes of steel pillars and wooden flooring. Yes, western home are much more modern and also very strong against the frequent earthquakes in Japan or any other type of natural disasters. But with the cultural destruction came an intellectual destruction. In the year 2000, Japan scored the highest grade for mathematic section among 40 other countries when Programme for International Student Assessment were conducted. Also for both the reading literacy and science section, Japan was in the top-five. However, in the most recent assessment done in 2006, Japan's mathematic level has dropped down to number 10 on the list and as for reading literacy, they don't even appear on the top-ten list anymore. (Wikipedia Japan) Surely, the education of Japan has collapsed. However, this perhaps is not just about how Japanese houses don't have *tatami* rooms any more but is rather the result of focusing on internationalism and trying to change the education system of Japan so drastically to meet the standards of western systems.

Anyone with any sense at all must be aware that in recent years the distinctive atmosphere that marks the closing of the year—the end-of-the-year rush, the ringing out of the old year and ringing in of the new, in a word, the Shinto sense of “year”—has begun to disappear from our midst. Any number of reasons for this turn of events come to mind, but one of them is surely that of late the twelfth month has come to be thought of as “the Christmas month.” One sees this more than ever among the young in particular.

Be that as it may, there are more homes in Japan today decorated with Christmas trees than with the traditional pine-and-bamboo, and among the young Christmas stories are better known

than our own myths. The idea of a “savior” who alone brings the human race salvation from its “sins” has been implanted in them.

This is more than a matter of a nursery tale that can be brushed aside with a smile. The essence of proselytizing does not lie in the communication of complicated doctrines. Most people enter the faith for extremely superficial reasons. In the West as well, conversion to Christianity—whether by coercion or free choice—begins with the superficial.

Of late Valentine’s Day and Halloween have jumped on the bandwagon of Christmas’s success. Even if the connection of these feasts to Christianity is more tenuous than Christmas is, they are not entirely unrelated. Just as Christmas is destroying the atmosphere of the end of the year, Valentine’s Day has cast a shadow over Setsubun, the celebration of the 3rd day of Spring according to the traditional calendar. Following the same pattern, Japan’s annual national feasts are slowly being eroded. Or is this to be welcomed as merely the latest display of our “multilayered” culture?

There is also something strange about the increase of Church weddings over the past several years. Tourist agencies and mass media have fanned the flames by advertising how “romantic” getting married in a Church is, and the Churches themselves gladly chime in to back them up. If anything, Christianity is critical of the “lack of principle” and “irreligiosity” of the Japanese, and yet the fact remains it is the Churches that are getting the most out of this “lack of principle.” Not only the actual “nonbelievers” who are being married, but their families and all involved are invited to take part in religious worship under the name of a “wedding ceremony,” to listen to a sermon, and to pray. One could hardly imagine a more propitious opportunity for evangelizing a captive audience of “nonbelievers.”

We Japanese are, granted, a religiously tolerant people, but there is something odd here that appears nowhere else. Whatever else is to be said about the whole business, one side, the Church, completely repudiates the other side’s belief as “heresy.” Can the Church be serious in blessing the weddings of “nonbelievers”? After all, are not nonbelievers really “headed for damnation”? What meaning can it possibly have to be a “one-day Christian” just for a wedding?

Japanese people love the western world. They’d do anything to become just like them whether it takes a price of destroying their own culture. Still, Japanese people don’t like *gaijins*.

Being a homogenous society Japanese people still draw a racist line between foreigner and themselves calling foreigners “outsiders” whenever they see one walking down the street, discriminating them just by their looks. This is just ridiculous. No matter how much they love the western world, they cannot accept the people. A myriad of foreigner visits Japan for the beautiful country everyday to get in touch with Japan and its people but the Japanese people do not return but just have them look around the country, let them take photos, and leave straight out. No doubt the Japanese people can’t help doing this because many of them know nothing about their own country, traditions, and culture. Japan is simply a mess. But the country is the home of cultural beauty that must never be forgotten. Japan has to do something before the country burns into ashes and dust. But what are we willing to do about it?

[Word Count: 2298]

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