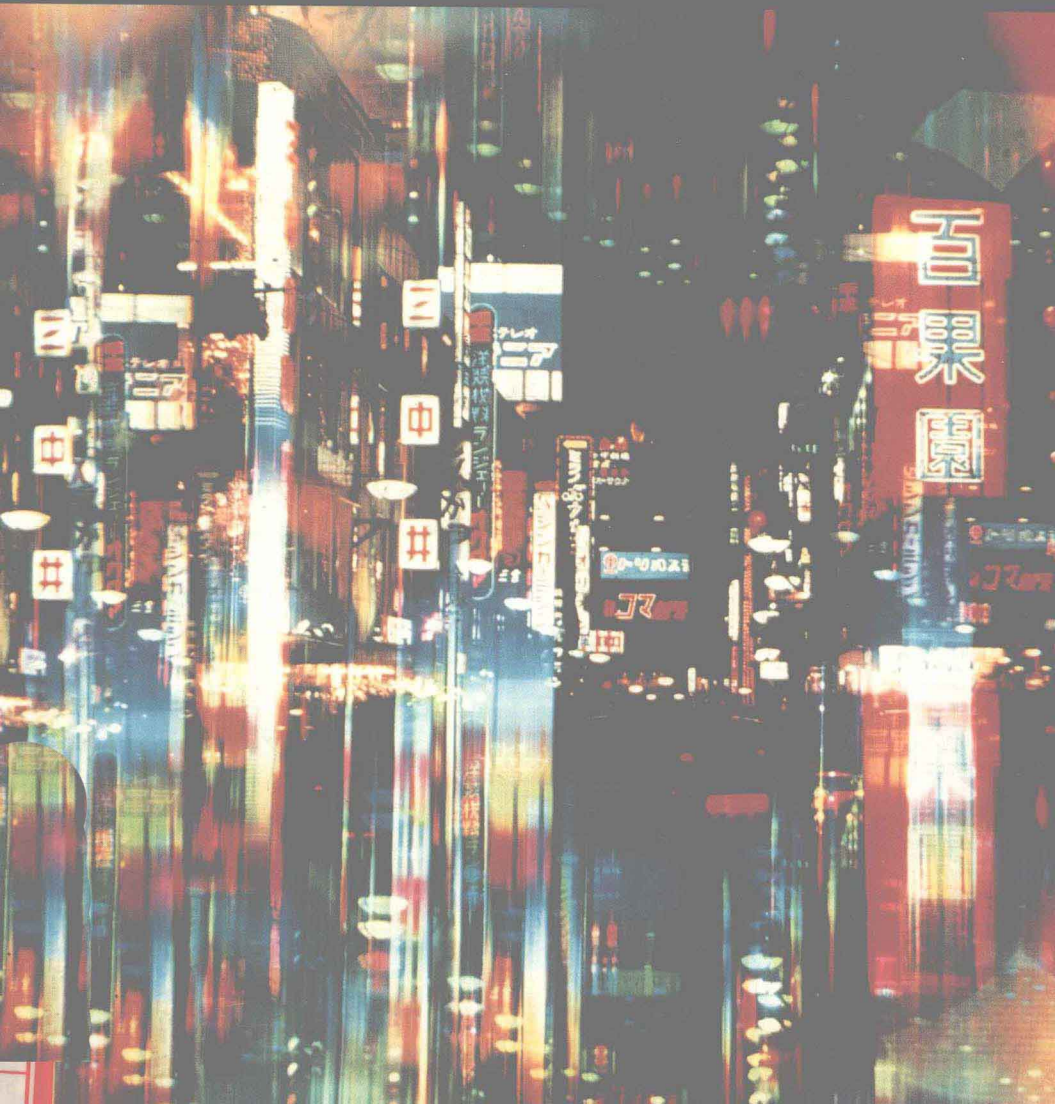


JAPAN

TRADITION AND CHANGE



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at Chattanooga*



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Japan: Tradition and Change

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this book is to increase your awareness of Japan, which is, and will be for the foreseeable future, one of the world's most important countries. Learning about Japan is more than memorization of facts and figures but must entail some careful thinking on your part about a people who, while similar in many ways to Americans, also think and behave quite differently from us. The time and effort you devote to this task should be worth it because knowledge of Japan will leave you better prepared for an increasingly interdependent world. It is also quite likely you'll acquire a deeper understanding of our own society through using the geography, history, and economy of another country as comparative points of reference.

Throughout our entire history when Americans have studied other nations the emphasis has been on Western Europe, while all of Asia, including Japan, has been ignored. As a result many Americans' knowledge of Japan is quite limited when compared to the level of understanding most Japanese exhibit about the United States. I hope this book will dispel some of that ignorance.

Finally, Japan is such a highly interesting place that there is no excuse for anyone suffering through a dull book on the subject. Therefore, one of my major goals, in addition to assisting you to better understand Japan, was to make this book lively and fun to read. Only you can be the judge of whether I have succeeded.

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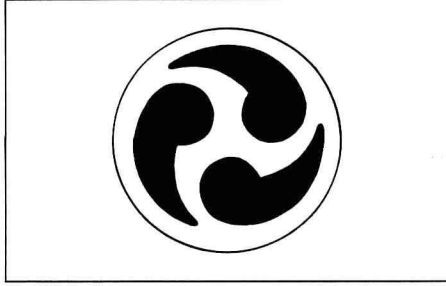
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C H A P T E R



O N E

JAPAN

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INTRODUCTION

A WALK THROUGH TOKYO

Two hours ago you landed at Narita, the main airport for Tokyo, Japan's capital. You've just slept through most of the bus ride from the airport to Tokyo Station. From the station, with the assistance of your Berlitz Japanese tourist guide and written English instructions, you manage the 20-minute cab ride to your hotel. You are staying in Akasaka, an area popular with foreigners and one of 23 districts in a city with a larger metropolitan area than New York City. It is four o'clock in the afternoon. Although you're tired from your flight, and Japan is fourteen hours ahead of the U.S. city from which you came, you are also extremely curious to take a firsthand look around. What will a walk down an Akasaka street reveal?

Throngs of people are everywhere. Never, except entering and exiting some sports stadiums back home, have you encountered so many people walking by each other. About a block from your hotel you notice two masses of people descending and ascending stairs that apparently lead to a subway station. Between your side of the street and the other side there are six lanes of two-way traffic and the congestion is unbelievable. You can't tell if the gasoline-like smell is a product of your imagination or the actual fumes from all the cars.

As you walk you notice that almost all the pedestrians have on Western-style dress. Groups of men wear conservative navy blue suits while women on the street wear, for the most part, clothes that you would see in any American city. Occasionally you see an older woman in a kimono, a traditional Japanese dress with a distinctive sash called an *obi*. Some teenage boys are wearing uncomfortable-looking high-collar black uniforms that remind you of movies about American military schools. Girls the same age have on similarly colored black dresses with white blouses. Some young people wear sweat shirts with English words on the front that seem to make little sense. As you walk by a couple of stores, you recognize the unmistakable beat of rock and roll, although you can't understand the words. Passing by an electronics store, you hear an old Beatles song in English.

Signs are mainly in Japanese and are unintelligible to you, but, as you cross major intersections, you notice that printed under the intricate markings are also names which seem to be in English. You sound out the name of the street you are walking down: Aoyama-dori.

You are pleasantly surprised to recognize from color schemes and logos the fast-food restaurants such as Shakey's, Kentucky Fried Chicken, and McDonald's that are as American as apple pie. Since the latter is your favorite hamburger haven back in the United States, you cross under the golden arches and enter the store. Immediately you observe that the restaurant is narrow, with stairs leading to a second floor.



Modern Japan: Source: From *Peasants, Rebels and Outcasts: The Underside of Modern Japan*, by Mikiso Hane. Copyright © 1982 by Mikiso Hane. Reprinted by permission of Pantheon Books, a Division of Random House, Inc.

Almost unbelievably the Big Macs look the same! However, you do notice, from pictures of bananas and kiwi, that they have fruit-flavored milk shakes that you've never seen before.

Also, the teenagers behind the counter, although attired in the same uniforms as back home, seem to be moving at a considerably faster pace than do some of your American friends who work in fast-food places. You feel proud and somewhat comfortable that from listening you quickly learn the Japanese word for Big Mac (Biggu Maku), order one, and upon eating it taste no difference between your first food in Japan and the thousand other fast-food burgers you've consumed.

As you leave McDonald's and walk on, you notice that if there were no Japanese signs on the office buildings and shops, it would be difficult to distinguish the architectural styles of most from those in a typical American city. However, there appears to be somewhere between one-third and one-half more buildings per city block than in the United States. Also, like McDonald's, quite a number of shops are narrower than American stores and have a second floor. Most buildings are much newer than many structures in a typical American street scene.

As you walk between two skyscrapers, though, you pass a small wooded area with two large vertical wooden poles, topped by a horizontal wooden pole, which look like gates and are unlike anything in your home town. Your English language tourist map indicates that the place is a Shinto religious shrine. After walking about 30 minutes, you cross at a traffic light to walk down the opposite side of the boulevard back to the hotel and you suddenly see a large palace and grounds covering several city blocks. There is absolutely nothing Oriental or Japanese about the architectural style of the palace, and upon close observation it reminds you of the famous French palace Versailles that you learned about in school. From one of the numerous Westerners walking along the street you learn that the palace is the residence of the crown prince of Japan, who is heir to the imperial throne.

This brief but intense introduction to Japan leaves you with a definite first impression. Except for the language difference, the Shinto shrine, and the extremely crowded street, you wonder if the Japanese really are that different from Americans after all.

JAPAN: A UNIQUE CULTURE

If, in fact, you were the visitor in the above street scene you would likely have the same first impression. Upon learning that Japanese play baseball, celebrate Christmas (though most Japanese are not Christian), and engage in many Western practices, many people also feel that perhaps Japanese



McDonald's restaurants such as the one in this picture and other American fast-food chains are enormous successes in Japan. Japanese teenagers often "hang out" inside the local McDonald's. Photo courtesy of Joyce Tatum.

are not a very distinctive people. Like many first impressions, this one is erroneous. Japanese are not only different in important ways from both Westerners and other Asians, but a case can be made that Japan is one of the world's more unique cultures. A major purpose of this book is to help you understand how Japan is unique compared with other Asian or with Western countries.

Through your vicarious walk down a Tokyo street you already have an idea of an aspect of human geography—living space—that makes much of the Japanese lifestyle unlike that of other nations. The four major islands in the Japanese archipelago¹ constitute a land area about the size of Montana. However, since nearly three-quarters of Japan is mountainous, the approximately 122 million people who live in Japan occupy a space significantly smaller than the rather small American state of Connecticut. Japan is the most densely populated major nation per habitable land area on earth.² Japanese, individually and collectively throughout life, must take this space problem into account. You'll learn more about Japan's living space dilemma throughout the book and especially in the chapter on geography.

Faced with life in a crowded and unpredictable environment, the Japanese have developed characteristics that have helped them not only to persevere, but to prosper, in comparison with most nations. Beginning in the second half of the sixth century when the collection of tribes on the islands experienced a massive infusion of knowledge from China, the Japanese have continually exhibited a talent for selectively, yet successfully, borrowing from other countries. After over 200 years of adopting Chinese religious practices, writing, and architecture, a period followed when the Japanese, in virtual isolation, shaped what was borrowed from China to fit their own needs.

The same pattern of intense borrowing and adaptation followed by cultural isolation occurred again in the 1500s, when the Japanese encountered, learned from, and then largely turned their backs on Europe. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries Japan continued to borrow selectively from other cultures while strongly rejecting what was viewed as unbecoming of Japanese. This ability to pick and choose from other cultures and to adapt what is selected to their own needs makes the Japanese unusual among the world's peoples.

Although some Westerners think of Japan as a nation of copiers, as was the case with our hypothetical visitor's first impressions of Tokyo, the periods of Japanese history when there was almost no contact with foreigners resulted in the development of many original and extremely dis-

¹Archipelago: a group of islands.

²Robert C. Christopher, *The Japanese Mind* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1983), p. 119.

inctive cultural practices. Take, for example, the typical Japanese attitude toward the daily bath. Bathing is considered such an important and stress-relieving daily ritual in Japan that almost no private homes are constructed where a commode and bathtub are in the same room. Other examples of truly unique cultural elements are the sliding paper panels still to be found in many Japanese houses, and a language that has no close relatives in the world.

Japan also stands alone in that in a historically short period, beginning in 1853 when Commodore Matthew Perry of the U.S. Navy sailed into Tokyo bay and ending in 1918, the country changed from a semi-feudal and relatively backward (by Western standards) country to a leading world power. Not only was this transformation achieved in an unprecedented period of time, but Japan was the first non-Western country to adopt modern technology while remaining strong enough to resist colonization by the European powers or the United States. Our examination of early and modern Japanese history should provide you with some understanding of the context of modern Japanese culture and of Japan's rapid change from feudal to modern nation.

It is quite likely that some time during this very day you have used a Japanese product. In the mid-1950s, Japanese economic output was less than that of Italy, one of the poorer of the Western European countries. Today, with three-tenths of one percent of world land area and about 3 percent of world population, the Japanese rank second in size only to the United States among market economies around the world.³ Japanese business practices are now studied extensively in the United States and elsewhere. Japan's current unemployment rate is on average less than half that of other modern industrialized countries. The Japanese post-World War II economic miracle and the reasons behind it constitute one of the most interesting aspects of Japanese culture about which you'll learn.

Although Japan's dynamic economy has long attracted world attention, people in other countries are now also beginning to study Japanese social institutions.⁴ Japan's schools, political system, and religious institutions, although not without serious problems, have been quite successful by world standards. They also are among some of the most unusual social institutions to be found anywhere on the planet.

Japanese elementary and secondary schools are possibly the world's best, while Japan's colleges and universities are in general considered in great need of reform. Well over one-third of all Japanese have no problems

³James C. Abegglen and George Stalk, Jr., *Kaisha: The Japanese Corporation* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1985), p. 18.

⁴Social institution: A group of individuals organized together for the purpose of perpetuating social norms.

with claiming affiliation with two separate religions. It is also not unheard of for many Japanese on occasion to participate in practices of three different religions.⁵ Japan is a democracy, yet one political party has governed since the early 1950s. In the chapter on social institutions, explanations for these seeming contradictions will be suggested.

If our visitor to Tokyo went out for a second walk on his or her first night in the city and looked carefully, the visitor would see, beside the numerous small restaurants and bars that dot the urban landscape, unattended stacked crates of food, beer, and soft drinks. Imagine the odds against encountering such a phenomenon in the United States or, for that matter, most other countries! Recent statistics indicate that while there are 205 robberies per 100,000 people in the United States, less than 2 per 100,000 occur in Japan.⁶

There are several reasons why Japan enjoys low crime and divorce rates, the world's highest literacy rate, and a reputation for superb products, but one major factor is the enormous positive influence of the group upon individual Japanese behavior. Group pressure on the individual also contributes to the quite common practice of arranged marriages, the general Japanese aversion to nonconformity, and the often ambiguous nature of spoken Japanese. Later we will examine in detail positive and negative aspects of the extremely strong influence of the group in Japan.

For all of Japan's success, the country is also somewhat unique in that since at least the 1600s the Japanese have never had a particularly easy time with other nations. Although since the end of World War II Japan and the United States have been staunch allies, a recent survey of Americans found that when Great Britain and Japan are compared, even though large numbers of us think the Japanese are better businessmen, make the best products, and treat employees best, we would still prefer British investment in this country to Japanese industry.⁷ Is this feeling on the part of Americans based on our misperceptions? Are the Japanese to blame? Or are we both at fault? One of several questions we'll explore when we consider Japan's future is her image problem with much of the rest of the world.

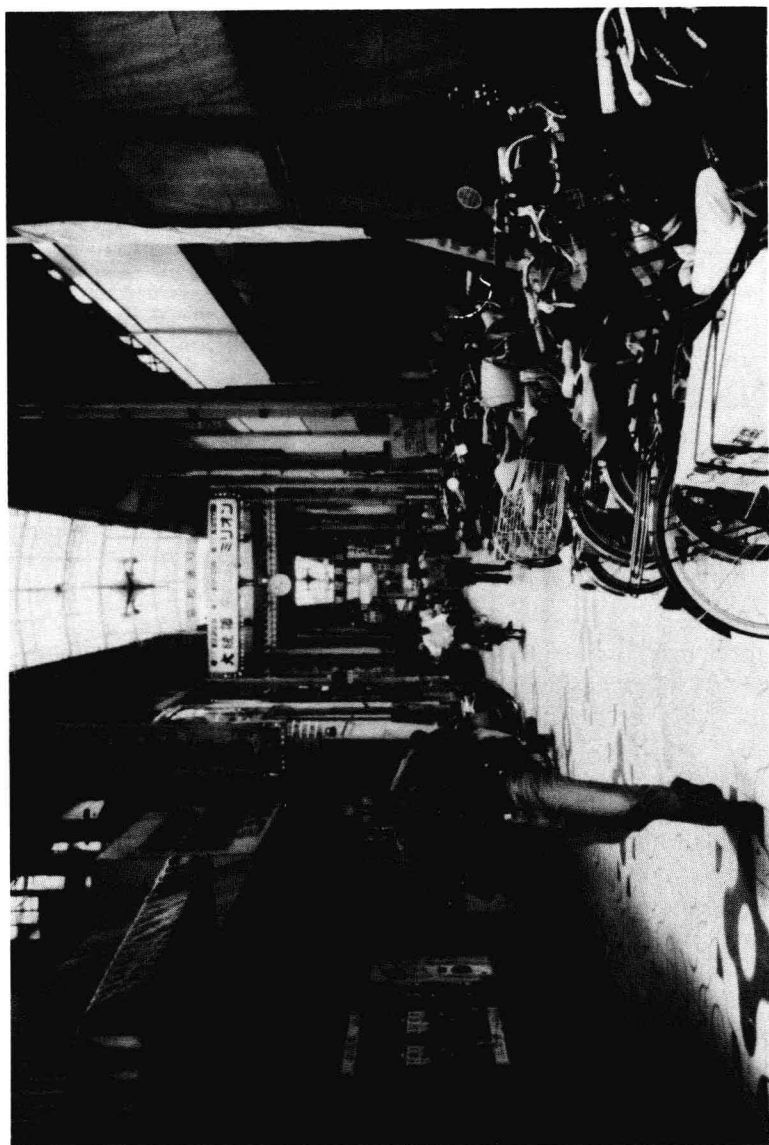
JAPAN: AN INFLUENTIAL NATION

If you are beginning to believe, as we obviously do, that Japan is a unique and highly interesting place, you still might have problems about spending your valuable time learning about one country. Japan is, of course, only

⁵Yoichi Anzai, ed., *Japan 1989: An International Comparison* (Tokyo: Japan Institute for Social and Economic Affairs, 1988), p. 92.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 92.

⁷Charles P. Freund, "The Zeitgeist Checklist," *The New Republic*, April 11, 1988, p. 8.



Japan has one of the lowest crime rates of any nation in the world. The bicycles on this street are not chained and locked as would be the case in the United States. Photo courtesy of Willie Mae Beattie.