

In Search of Culture

By Wilson Koh



Author Wilson Koh

Genealogy, as a matter of personal interest and family record-keeping, was never more than a passing fad in Singapore a few years ago. In my family, little is known of our collective past except up till the last two generations: my parents migrated from Malaysia after having worked in Singapore since they were children, and before them my grandparents' grandparents made their way into Malaysia from the southern parts of China to escape poverty. That we can just leave our birth country and take root in a new land so easily, and that we know so little of our ancestors, have been a constant source of wonder among my Japanese friends.

According to Marcus Garvey, “a people without the knowledge of their past history, origin, and culture is like a tree without roots.” In an effort to fill this sense of emptiness within my heart, I had attempted to study Singapore’s and China’s culture in my youth. Yet the hole in my heart was not satisfied. Singapore’s culture was very young and diluted, while I was too far removed from China to feel any sense of belonging to its magnificent yet unfamiliar culture. Popular British and American cultures also did not suit my values, and it was only after floundering in this transitional state for another half a decade that I learnt about Japanese culture. From then on, it was clear that I had to come and directly experience living in Japan.

When most people, Japanese and foreigners alike, talk about Japanese culture, they are often quick to point out that Japan has such a unique culture because it is an island nation, and that the sea has cut it off from external influences. However, I would beg to differ. It is apparent that early in its past Japan had imported its language, Buddhism and Confucianism from China, showing that it was susceptible to foreign influences. However, the crux was the 鎖国政策 or the *sakoku* policy enacted by the Tokugawa shogunate under Tokugawa Iemitsu from the early 17th century to the middle of the 19th century. The effect of this “self-isolation” trade restriction policy was that Japan developed a very strong sense of self, and everything that was not Japanese was markedly separated into the foreign or imported category in the Japanese mind. Hence, even after Japan ended its seclusion from the world, the need to make foreign technologies and ideas more palatable to the Japanese people resulted in the practice of adjusting anything foreign to make it more “Japanese”. Examples of how such a process has been beneficial to the country abound in the technology sector, such as in automobiles and cameras.

Just as all things foreign were “japanized” in Japan, so has Japanese culture begun to “japanize” the world, particularly in East and South East Asian countries. The last few decades have seen a huge wave of interest in Japanese culture around the world. This explosion of interest in Japanese culture can be seen in the spread of

Japanese cuisine, such as conveyor belt sushi restaurants and ramen shops opening in new countries, and in the popularity of Japanese movies, games, *manga*, *anime* and fashion in the West. Seizing this potential to increase the reach of Japan’s soft power, the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry set up a Creative Industries Promotion Office in 2010 to encourage the growth of Japan’s creative and cultural industries under the theme of “Cool Japan”.

Omotenashi

Recently, the Japanese word おもてなし (*omotenashi*) has been popularized by Tokyo’s Olympic bid ambassador Christel Takigawa, who used the word — roughly translating into “the Japanese spirit of attentive hospitality” — in her speech to the International Olympic Committee. The area in which the word *omotenashi* is commonly used is in the service, hospitality and tourism industry. A quick Google search would yield thousands of tour guides, hotels and ryokan boasting of providing the highest level of *omotenashi* to all customers. Personally, I understand this word as referring to an unexpectedly thoughtful level of service that demonstrates particular consideration for the customer. Such a high level of service, especially to someone coming from a land without a strong service culture, invariably creates a feeling of pleasant surprise among foreign tourists in Japan.

On my first morning in Japan, I had just touched down at Narita airport after an arduous midnight flight. Upon clearing the immigration checkpoint, a member of the Soka University International Students’ Affairs Office was already there waiting for me, with a bottle of mineral water in hand. This gift of just a bottle of mineral water, after I had slept fitfully for hours in the dry plane environment and been served only infrequent tiny cups of water, was my initiation into the concept of *omotenashi*. In Singapore, the place I hail from, one can also receive service of such high quality, but only if one can afford the premium they charge. Otherwise, one often has to make do with unresponsive service staff or, even worse, service staff from mainland China equipped only with Chinese language skills — despite English being the official language of business, commerce, education and administration in Singapore.

Kyūdō

I first got to know about 弓道 (Japanese archery) when searching for clubs to join at Soka University. A few exchange students and I were invited to observe a regular training session, and I have since become an enthusiastic student.

The first thing one notices about Japanese archery’s over two

Photo: Author



There are still many schools in Japan with traditional martial arts clubs, such as Kyudo.

metres-long bow is its asymmetrical shape, shorter below the grip and longer above. The next astonishing point is how the bow manages to spin outwards in the archer's left hand after the shot. The earliest evidence of the Japanese bow is in an image on a Yayoi-period (300 BC to AD 300) bronze bell. The scene shows an archer shooting at a deer, with the archer's grip below the center of the bow. These are the two unique features that make Japanese archery different from that of other civilizations.

Training in the use of the Japanese bow is also different from Western archery. Here the focus is not only on the correct way to draw and release the bow. The All Nippon Kyudo Federation prescribed a style of 八節 (*hasetsu* — eight stages of shooting), which states how the archer should enter the shooting zone, raise the bow, draw the bow, and lower the bow after the shot has been made. As such, Japanese archery practice appears as much a ceremony as a sport when compared to Western styles of archery practice.

The underlying concept behind the different emphasis in Japanese archery stems from 真善美 (*shinzenbi*), roughly translating into “truth, goodness, beauty”. This means that if the archer shoots with the correct body posture and frame of mind, beautiful shooting is naturally realised. I find this to be a refreshing point of view not just with regards to archery in general, but also to how one should live one's life. More often than not, what is more valuable in life is not the destination but the journey, the experience of the process by which we become who we are. By putting our all into learning and doing things correctly, it is only to be expected that success will follow sooner or later. However, if we become too focused on the target, we tend to lose sight of the truly important matters and thus end up achieving little in the end. Other factors, such as having the correct attitude and applying the correct steps and methods can also be just as important, if not more so.

For example, in Singapore, parents' focus on helping their children to get a good education has become so prevalent that this has given rise to a very robust tuition industry, where many teachers plan to becoming a full-time independent tutor or join a tuition agency if they feel they can no longer cope with the heavy workload teaching in government schools. Even students like me, as long as we have good examination results to “vouch” for our ability to study, can easily get part-time jobs giving tuition to students studying in lower grades. This strong focus on only examination results and certificates has paradoxically resulted in many students in Singapore losing their interest in studying, ending up just memorizing new information and

concepts only to regurgitate them for the next tests. In other words, too much focus on examination results and certification actually reduced many students to “exam machines”, capable only of answering examination questions but struggling when they have to think in real world terms or out of the box.

Yūsenseki

On the flipside, I find it strange that even though Japanese people are usually kind and polite, Japan paradoxically does not have a strong culture of giving up either train or bus seats, especially the 優先席 or priority seats, to those who need them more (at least in the Tokyo area). Although I do see the signs reminding commuters to give up the priority seats to pregnant women, parents carrying infants, or the elderly and infirm, after four months and

Photo: Wikimedia Commons



about 40 train and bus trips, I have yet to see anyone give up their seat to someone who needs it more. However, this does not necessarily mean that Japanese are abnormally selfish when it comes to seats, as even my fellow exchange students apparently see no problem behaving in the same way as the Japanese. Train companies give me the impression they are concentrating more on encouraging commuters not to use their mobile phones near the priority seats than making these seats live up to their name.

Perhaps in Singapore, famous for its highly paternalistic style of governance and high degree of government intervention in social behavior, social graces in public situations have improved greatly from before. Furthermore, Singapore's infamous citizen-journalism website STOMP, or Straits Times Online Mobile Print, has been significant in giving rise to a culture of naming and shaming Singapore's train commuters for not giving up priority seats to those who need them more. These could be the reasons why Singaporean commuters more readily give up priority seats than in Japan.

Conclusion

A country with a history as long as Japan's would unsurprisingly have many more unique and fascinating aspects to its culture than I could list here. There is a lot that every country can learn from the way Japan has preserved its traditional culture in this era of modern living.

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