



moi-yari

— Japan's Cultural Strength

By Min Joo Kim



Author Min Joo Kim

Six days before the admissions result of Keio University were announced in March 2011, the Great East Japan Earthquake occurred. Hearing all news about the terrible damage and great confusion, I thought it might be impossible to go to Japan, and when the result came through that I had been accepted, I couldn't help but decide not to go as planned due to discouragement from people around me. All the channels and websites were giving the latest news, and social network services were filled with vivid experiences; these became a great comfort to me so that I could at least pretend to rationalize my decision.

A few days later, I saw a particular blog on a website that grabbed my attention. After the earthquake, I intentionally tried not to read any news, good or bad, related to Japan so as not to feel too many regrets, but on that day I clicked on the item titled "An unflappable Japanese public order in the face of catastrophe" as if drawn by magic. The posting, written by a Korean resident in Japan, contained several pictures of supermarkets, drugstores and gas stations and gave an honest explanation of the situation in Japan, showing that what the media had been reporting as a completely destroyed and irreparable place for the past few days was not entirely the case. Losing one's composure and becoming disorderly is natural human behavior in a crisis or when under threat, but the Japanese were impressively composed in this situation. In spite of interminable queues, people and traffic were very orderly, and there was little sign of congestion or commotion.

The author of the blog wrote, "The next thing I knew, I was the only one who was making a great fuss. Frustrating inside though it might be, Japanese people and society are calmly restoring quiet and bravely getting back into shape. Watching people going to work, strolling in the park and saying hello to each other as usual, I became able to assimilate with them as if nothing had happened."

Reading this, I became convinced that I could go to Japan, and determined to do so.

Queues

I finally came to Japan after many complications, and found that the public order which had made a deep impression in my mind was even more impressive in reality. People would stand quietly in long lines in front of ticket machines and wait for trains in two lines, neatly splitting to either side of the train doors as they opened and



Photo: Sendai city

People queue for necessities, Izumi, Sendai, four days after the Great East Japan Earthquake (March 15, 2011).

getting on the train without pushing. Even in getting off the train, taking escalators and moving through the ticket gates they preserved good order. Outside of train stations, too, I could see this discipline. Cars observed the red traffic lights regardless of whether people were crossing the street, and moved calmly without honking horns.

In this way, Japanese people tacitly practice and observe public order, even in little ways that I'd never expected. Being orderly in public places anywhere is obviously desirable but not compulsory, so there is a high possibility that it will not be observed, but Japanese people seem to have been following it habitually. Directly seeing and experiencing this behavior, I soon realized it was the main reason why Japan was able to recover from the earthquake faster than expected and why Japanese society has been able to remain competitive for a long time.

No Talking!

Soon after arriving in Japan, I was in a train and got a phone call from my mom. I talked on the phone for more than 10 minutes very naturally and actively in a high-toned voice and laughing at some points. As soon as I had finished, I realized every single person in the car was staring at me, and their glances continued for another 10 minutes until I got off the train. I couldn't understand why they had

been gazing at me, and I felt uncomfortable. However, when I got on the train on the way back home, I felt a warm blush rise to my cheeks, because I saw a blue sticker with an “off” sign on a cell phone attached to every door. I looked around and realized that not only was no one talking on the phone but also people were barely making any noise, even when having a conversation.

Later, I saw other interesting sights on the train, such as when a lady got a phone call and said with her hand over her mouth that she was on a train and hurriedly switched off, or when a mother immediately gave her kids a good scolding when they talked too loudly. It was novel and surprising for me to see such behavior because even though not making a noise on a train is part of a public information campaign in Japan, it is not defined by law and so not following it is not necessarily untoward. But everyone followed it as if written in a script. I asked one of my Japanese friends about this one day, and was deeply impressed by her answer that since the inside of a train is a public place everyone needs to follow public manners, otherwise social order would be threatened. Japanese people have been naturally maintaining this kind of public etiquette in creating a better social environment, and this behavior definitely reflects the national character.

Not Touching Others & Their Belongings

Last summer, I did an internship in Hong Kong for a month as part of a student exchange program at Keio University. I was with other Japanese students and one day one of them lost her laptop in a coffee shop. I naturally expected her to be really disappointed about this loss, but she came back with an angry and flushed face, and her reaction was a big surprise to me. She said someone had taken her laptop while she went to a sandwich shop, leaving all of her stuff behind in the coffee shop. I thought it was simply too ridiculous for words and said, “You deserved it!” but she replied right away, “It never happens in Japan! No one touches other people’s belongings even when the owners are not there!”

After this incident, I wondered if it really happens and began to look carefully at Japanese behavior. Not long afterwards, I lost a card wallet containing credit cards and was in a panic, as I was certain I wouldn’t be able to find such valuable lost property again. Yet within a few hours I got a call from the police, as if by magic, that my wallet had been found. I asked the police officer if retrieving lost articles was common or not, and the policeman answered with a smile that it happens a lot. This kind of behavior can be seen in daily life; there was a day when a little boy touched a keychain on my backpack, and I thought this could be laughed off, but his mother gave him a good scolding that it is against etiquette, and both the boy and boy’s mom sincerely apologized to me. As a part of public manners, never

Source: NISHI-NIPPON RAILROAD CO., LTD.



A poster encourages people to observe good manners by not using their cellphones on the train.

touching other people’s belongings is deeply seated among the Japanese and an intrinsic part of Japan’s sense of order, and so it was a natural reaction for my Japanese friend not to understand why her laptop had been stolen.

Several experiences during the past two and a half years have shown me how deeply Japanese people care about public order. The spirit of “not causing inconvenience to a person”, which is considered a Japanese characteristic, actually permeates much of Japanese society. No matter how long it takes, no matter how disastrous the situation is, and no matter how many people are looking at them, they steadily maintain order without self-consciousness.

Japan is absolutely not like the luxurious and fancy country I had always imagined, but with every single person, even small kids, observing public order and having a sense of etiquette, it is certainly clear why Japan has been categorized as a developed country. The consideration and respect shown for others in public society is sufficient evidence of how Japan has been able to maintain high national standards for a long time. I myself have also been influenced by these aspects of Japanese life, which were at first exceedingly unfamiliar and unsettling to me and made me think the Japanese were going too far, and they have become a crucial part of my daily life. Many people have asked me if I regret my decision to go to Japan. I have always answered without hesitation that I have learned what I could not have learned from books through priceless moral experiences — and so have never regretted and never will regret that decision. **J.S.**

Min Joo Kim is a 3rd-year student at Keio University SFC majoring in GIGA (Global Information and Communication Technology and Governance Academic Program) at the Faculty of Environment and Information Studies.