

# Japanese Cultural Attractions in a Modern & Global Context



Author Sanjeev Sinha

By Sanjeev Sinha

The world is constantly looking for new socio-economic models, as well as improving and experimenting with the old ones, to find a way towards a better society — one in which wealth is distributed more evenly, crime and unemployment are low, the environment is protected, transport systems are comfortable, and people are courteous and polite to each other. Japan has much of this but the world doesn't know enough about it. It is useful to understand the underlying cultural strengths of Japan, as well as the challenges the country faces, so that others may be encouraged to emulate some of them. I would like to highlight a few of the key aspects of Japanese culture.

## Social Harmony Through Teamwork

Japanese teamwork can often be best observed in the field of sports. Japan has been improving over the years in various team sports and even in individual events there is a strong element of team spirit and a visible desire to live up to the expectations of coaches, teammates and fans, rather than simply to prove oneself as an individual — so much so that athletes are appreciated more for their contribution to the team than for their individual performances.

This team spirit is rooted in a strong social value system. In Japan, hard work and contributing to society are appreciated much more than individual achievements — even to the extent that often a relative failure from well-meaning team work will be appreciated more than a big individual success. As a result, individuals brought up in such a value system also strive to be good team contributors and assess themselves on the basis of how the team perceives them. This value system helps to create a strong sense of homogeneity in society.

On the other hand, such a system also discourages individuals from standing out and individual excellence can be hard to find. Hence it is often said that Japan lacks leadership. But on closer inspection one can find a different kind of leadership in society. Teachers (*sensei*) are very highly respected in Japan, as are seniors (*senpai*) at schools and

in companies or sports, and they generally help and guide the students, or juniors (*kohai*). People of higher seniority, experience and status often help younger team members from behind the scenes, commanding respect in this less visible way rather than by personal charisma. Instead of leadership from the front, there is more support from behind and mentoring or guidance from above.

Understandably, it's also not easy to change directions in this Japanese-style system compared to the front-led leadership systems more abundant in the West and this becomes a point of difficulty in a new globalized world where high volatility and uncertainty need to be dealt with. Although the Japanese system may help maintain lower income disparities, lower crime rates and a social harmony which has its own virtues for human life, Japan is no longer a sort of "Galapagos" insulated from the global forces of change and faces the challenge of striking a new kind of balance.

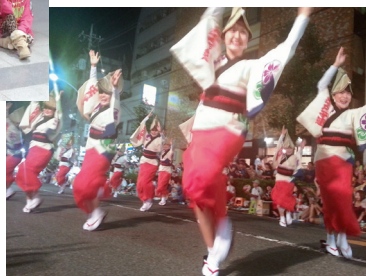
## Social Conscience

Related to this notion of teamwork is a strong social conscience in Japan. The clean streets and public places are a proof of this. Putting society first and personal priorities second is often an observable aspect of behaviour among Japanese people, which also leads to the



A kids' dance group

Photo: Author



Street dancing at Awa Odori festival



A neat and clean local fish market

Photo: Author



A small tea shop in Kyoto

reputedly low crime rates in the country.

A notable example of Japanese social conscience was seen in the aftermath of the great earthquake and tsunami of March 2011. Unlike the scenes of looting, shoplifting and rioting that are a common occurrence in other parts of the world in the wake of natural disasters, no such behaviour was reported in Japan at all, only great acts of people helping each other across the country.

### Respect & Pride in All Kinds of Work

Recently the deputy prime minister of Singapore, Tharman Shanmugaratnam, noted the system of students cleaning the toilets and doing various other kinds of cleaning at Japanese elementary schools, saying this leads to a respect for all kinds of work and makes people better citizens.

This is indeed well entrenched in Japan. People with specific vocations like gardeners, painters, plumbers, accountants and lawyers are all treated with respect, like a *sensei*. In return this leads people to have pride in their own work and a desire for full professionalism, decorum and perfectionism, my next favourite item in this list.

### Perfectionism & Constant Desire for Improvement

Recently I was invited for a discussion with the owner of a large Japanese curry chain-shop and I learnt about their plans to enter the Indian market. The president emphasized their high quality, food safety standards and consistency, with which I agreed. I sometimes eat Japanese curry which, though a small subset of the large variety within Indian cuisine, is delicious and healthy, with hygiene maintained from the farm all the way to the plate.

It also reminded me of the so called “Kyo-French” — French food improvised in Kyoto and now beginning to be appreciated even back in France. We also discussed how Japanese car makers improved upon American automobile technology and now have a major market share back in the United States. The list goes on.

One can easily see the reasoning. First of all, it's the Japanese culture of specialization and perfection of delivery and service. Everyone focuses on his or her specific job and goes on to master it. At the same time within Japan the industrial/economic environment is meticulously organized and goes through very carefully planned improvements. The food ingredients for the curry would be carefully produced or imported with stringent standards, then processed and

delivered in excellent condition right on time. Everyone in the supply chain carries out his or her task with dedication and the whole system works beautifully, leading to a consistently healthy, hygienic and delicious curry on every plate. On the flip side, if a piece of the system behaves differently than expected the whole process goes haywire, though this is rare in Japan so far.

This explains why exporting finished products is one of Japan's strengths. Even in the case of overseas manufacturing, many Japanese companies took along a whole set of services: a major Japanese car manufacturer took along its auto parts logistics service provider to India, and many other car manufacturers took along many of their Japanese parts and service providers to China and almost replicated the industry structure there in the 1980s and 1990s.

But nowadays, as technology spreads, there are more cost competitive local suppliers of both components and services. This creates a challenge for Japanese companies operating overseas, especially in industrially developing countries where the processes are fast changing and surprises are common.

As, for example, automobile companies from other countries are better able to work with local suppliers and enjoy the cost advantage, it puts pressure on Japanese companies to work more with the local environment. That takes away the domestic advantage of a very highly organized industry in Japan and necessitates being able to work within less predictable circumstances, which Japan is not used to and has been less prepared for in recent decades. It is a challenge but can be overcome by a dynamic and holistic management style, and I look forward to delicious Japanese curry in India.

### Modesty

Unlike most other countries of the world, Japan does not put much focus on the ranking of the richest people in the country. People hesitate to display their wealth. As a hobby and a result of high income many people do own expensive luxury cars but they often feel shy to take them out as that would be to display their wealth.

Modesty is seen at all levels and situations in Japan. This also helps create respect for each other and a relative lack of dissatisfaction between the rich and the poor, which is another reason for lower crime rates. It is also one of the reasons for perfection in small pieces of art and technology. Rather than making large displays of their art works Japanese artisans often focus on small objects like dolls and *ikebana* and small pieces of technology reflected in miniaturized gadgets and toys.



Photo: Author

Maneki-neko in Kanazawa



Photo: Author

A sleeping cabin in a train





Photo: Author

Retractable chopsticks that fit neatly into a small bento box

## Hospitality

All of the above can be seen in action by foreigners visiting Japan in the form of the hospitality offered by the country, a culture of *omotenashi* which has become a key slogan for the Tokyo Olympics in 2020. Taking pride in their own professionalism, restaurateurs are always polite and courteous, the staff at the railway stations are always willing to help and guide travellers, and at the peak of this culture are the Japanese traditional *ryokan* across the country.

## Coexistence of Tradition & Technology

The world has two distinct images of Japan: samurai and shinkansen. Indeed, Japan lives up to both simultaneously. It's very common to see centuries' old traditions being followed in Japan, often assisted by the latest technology and with attention paid to modern safety and environmental standards.

Mitsubishi Estate recently rebuilt a more than 100-year-old building replicating the appearance brick by brick, while making it into a very high-tech art gallery with cutting-edge humidity, temperature and lighting controls for protection of precious artwork and also making the whole complex barrier-free for wheelchair access.

## Humanity & Care

A very personal experience will give a good idea of these cultural virtues. Last year I hurt myself while playing soccer. Not being able to move due to intense pain, I had to call an ambulance. Hearing the siren of the approaching ambulance barely three minutes later was a big relief. They first checked my vital signs and took me to the nearest hospital with an orthopaedic surgeon. There the doctor immediately attended to me and had an X-ray taken, and after a thorough inspection told me I would just need to rest my legs for a while and there was nothing to worry about. They did ask for my name, age, and medical history etc., but gave top priority to my physical condition, and so far no one had bothered to check whether I had medical insurance and the means to pay or not! The damage to the wallet was indeed quite negligible. I also got a wheelchair and returned home.

A couple of days later, the good weather tempted me to go outside. I was very touched by the specially positioned buttons for the physically disabled both outside and inside the smoothly operating elevators, besides the kind help from fellow passengers. Once on the road,



Photo: Author

The author helping to carry a mikoshi (portable shrine)

enjoying the new exercise of my arms rolling the wheels, I soon found myself almost two kilometres away near my favourite temple at Tsukiji. I realized how the pedestrian-crossings and walk-ways were constructed with great care for even people with physical difficulties.

One another day when I stopped a taxi in front of my home, the driver helped me into the taxi with a smile and folded my wheel chair and put it in the trunk. I did not know my borrowed wheelchair had such a folding capacity! I remembered a friend working in city planning in Japan talking about their big focus on the concept of "Universal Design"! I also remembered seeing blind people walking briskly on the omnipresent yellow pathways and even changing trains and buses with ease in Japan, often all by themselves. Many train stations are now working on making themselves completely barrier-free for wheelchairs, while many buses have special "non-step" features for the same reason.

This concern for the weakest and most disadvantaged people in society is quite remarkable. From my own experience, I could feel how this helps to build a sense of security and mutual respect in society which naturally leads to teamwork and eventually enhances the social harmony and economic productivity of the whole system.

After the truly heart-warming experience of these few days, today the doctor told me I'm fine again and ready to play soccer. But I will continue to notice those yellow pathways all over Japan with much admiration from now on!

## For the World to Learn

Other countries around the world could learn much from these aspects of Japanese social culture. Developing countries, for example, would do well to emulate the respect and pride in all kinds of professions that is seen in Japan, while for countries in the rich developed world adopting the Japanese culture of modesty would be well worth considering.

But these Japanese virtues are sometimes not even adequately recognized in Japan itself. I think it's important for Japan to recognize its own virtues, to maintain and consciously improve them, and to promote them to the rest of the world.

**JS**

*Sanjeev Sinha is president of the Sun and Sands Group, advising on crossborder investments and business strategies between India and Japan.*