

Japanese Perceptions of Foreigners in the Age of Trump



Author Marshall Sherrell

By Marshall Sherrell

Historical Isolation

In 1853 by order of US President Millard Fillmore, American naval Commodore Matthew Perry forced Japan to budge on a centuries-old seclusion policy which had limited foreign trade and influence in Japan, especially from Western countries. A series of unequal treaties were implemented as American traders began to exploit Japanese markets. Soon other Western countries took notice of the fortune to be reaped, and began their own trade expeditions into Japan.

As the physical world reflects in our outlook on life, it could be said that Japan's old policy of isolationism was an expression of the fact of the country's geographic isolation. Foreign people and foreign ways of thinking have often been met with fear if not hostility. Although interpretations vary as to what it means to be Japanese — the novelist Junichiro Tanizaki compared his own culture to a dark room of shadows — no one is confused about what it means to be non-Japanese. Either the fact or pervasive notion of Japanese homogeneity makes Japan a country in which otherness is easily identified.

"Isolationism" could also be reflected in the self-sufficiency of Japan's industries. Through much of history, Japan has been able to sustain itself through its own domestic labor and natural resources. In more recent history, however, Japan has had to look to other countries to supplement shortages in labor and food production. In the Information Age, the resources to be mined will also come in the form of innovation and technical expertise, the need for which is expected to spur developed countries into a more globalized future by necessity.

There are also fears which accompany such a prospect. Far be it from me to call those fears unfounded. After all, my American predecessors did not come to Japan to study and appreciate this country as I did, but to take advantage of its citizenry and exploit its resources. Again, in World War II, American military forces brought unprecedented bloodshed to Japan. Also, while many countries have recently become diversified both ethnically and religiously, that diversity has not always brought about peace or cohesion to the citizenry.

Reactionary Nationalism

While civilizations are on the cusp of either a breakthrough or a breakdown in globalization, some have reacted defensively. Certain

elected officials have become symbols of the frustration felt by peoples who fear they will soon be replaced, and for countries like the United States, their platform has become a rallying point for those who believe in the value of an ethnically and/or ideologically homogenous society. Having pointed out this conflict of interest, it is not my goal to curry support or opposition for any elected official, but to understand how their influence has affected us.

Of course, I'm talking about Donald Trump. As an American in Japan, cultural exchange between the US and Japan is of particular interest to me. However, I believe the scope of my query is much broader than the Japan-America relationship. Due to the global presence of American media, and American political interest in global affairs, people of many nations have had strong reactions to Trump and his brand. American influence is especially notable in a country which shares such a unique relationship with the US. I have therefore sought to explore the question: How do Japanese see foreign people in the Age of Trump?

Last summer, I worked on a project for which I asked people to offer me their opinions on the American military presence in Japan. After several conversations, I do not recall any Japanese person telling me that they actually want Japan to have a military independent of the US. Most of the opinions offered to me were simply disinterested, ranging

Photo: Website of the Prime Minister of Japan and his Cabinet



Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and President-elect Donald Trump shaking hands on Nov. 17, 2016

from “I don’t know” to “I think it’s fine” when I asked about whether Japanese people wanted to see changes in the way their military was managed. Although an apathetic assent to the present situation may seem unextraordinary, even this innocuous position has been challenged in the Age of Trump.

After all, it was the US president-to-be who, in 2016, said that Japan would need to pay the US more money for protection, or be forced to defend itself, as we would pull our forces from Japan. This seems to have been another example of empty rhetoric. Nevertheless, the sentiments Trump expressed allude to a larger issue; it is impossible to maintain the status quo in Japan as businesses and culture diversify.

The Fight for Equality

The last decade has been a tumultuous one for Japan in terms of cultural identity. While anti-Korean groups such as *Zaitokukai* had gained notoriety, they were also met with resistance both by foreign residents in Japan and by many concerned Japanese citizens. The battle for racial equality has come to a judicial level in recent years as well.

In 2014, the United Nations issued a recommendation for Japan to rectify its hate speech issues. Japan did indeed pass a national ban against hate speech in 2016. However, the lax wording of this new law, coupled with low enforceability, have permitted some forms of hate speech to continue into the present. To bring this new law into an actionable definition, localities have adopted their own laws in support of it. In July 2016, the city of Osaka became the first to do so, introducing an ordinance which adds definitions and examples of hate speech, and permitting local authorities to take action against it.

2016 was also a special year for the US, as we elected our new president. In contrast with tensions in Europe and saber-rattling in much of the East, Trump’s relationship with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has been markedly different. After Trump’s election, Abe was the first world leader to visit and congratulate him in person. The alignment of ideology between these two leaders is staunchly apparent. Both seem to see a danger in mass immigration, and both are open about their desire to protect the national interests of their own countries first and foremost. Trump had threatened to pull the American military out of the East if nations like Japan didn’t pay greater sums of money for military protection, while Abe has long been an advocate of removing constitutional restraints on Japan’s own military forces, which would entail the revival of a self-sufficient Japanese military.

In 2017, Abe easily won re-election as prime minister in spite of his push toward Japanese remilitarization, and even a possible connection with the funding of a strongly nationalistic, anti-Korean kindergarten recently established in Osaka. These issues notwithstanding, Abe’s stance on national security and economic policy are thought to be significant factors which contributed to his re-election. Some view the political tides in Japan and the US as an indication of growing xenophobic sentiment. I would posit, instead, that politicians with their many foibles often fail to express the will of the people.

The presence of groups like *Zaitokukai*, or the timing of political and

social movements toward nationalistic ends, cannot easily be correlated with the influence of the new US president. Xenophobic sentiments were around long before Trump, after all; *Zaitokukai* having been founded back in 2006. In the Japanese political sphere, former Transport Minister Nariaki Nakayama resigned amid controversy in 2008 after saying during an interview that Japanese people don’t like foreigners, while the current governor of Tokyo, Yuriko Koike, has been criticized as anti-Korean over numerous incidents, including her pre-election promise to shut down the development of a new Korean school in Tokyo’s Shinjuku district. The battle for equality is ancient and global.

Voices of the People

To hear from real Japanese people, I sent out a survey to some of my Japanese acquaintances, to understand how they view foreigners, and whether the influence of Trump has affected that perception. Although there was mostly negative feedback about Trump and his influence, no one surveyed said that his election had affected how they view foreign people. On the contrary, most Japanese people, especially the younger generation, seem to want more foreign people to come to Japan.

Some of those surveyed did mention the stereotypical negative racial perceptions in Japan, such as Chinese being considered as rude, or black people being considered as dangerous. These and other stereotypes have persisted for many years already; but, optimistically, such beliefs are on the decline. In previous years, many foreign residents of Japan have spoken of experiences where their foreign appearance led to them being refused service at shops or restaurants; this has never happened to me. The laws and culture of Japan are — slowly — adapting to an increasingly multiethnic society.

Of course, some people with xenophobic sentiments may feel empowered in the wake of recent political events. But for most of society, the sudden focus on xenophobia, which has come to the forefront in media and politics, seems to have served as a reminder of why we find racism so disgusting. As for the influence of Trump, a recent survey conducted by the Pew Research Center found that only 24% of Japanese people are confident in Trump’s decision-making ability, and 41% believe US-Japan relations will worsen under his leadership. In the end, his rhetoric and reputation seem to have provoked opposition, which will also entail opposition to that which he is said to represent, including xenophobia. As unintuitive as it may be to see that as positive, I think that, among both Americans and Japanese, the perceived foibles of their leadership have caused the citizenry to think critically about the kind of country they want to live in in the future. Whatever visibility has been granted to the minority of voices calling for racial and ethnic separation, these cries are merely the death knells of a tribal ideology which the emerging world has, and will continue to, march away from.

JS

Marshall Sherrell is a 4th year student at the University of Washington, majoring in Creative Writing and Japanese. While studying as an exchange student at Keio University, he also writes articles for Samurai Meetups (samuraimeetups.or.jp).