

A La Japanese

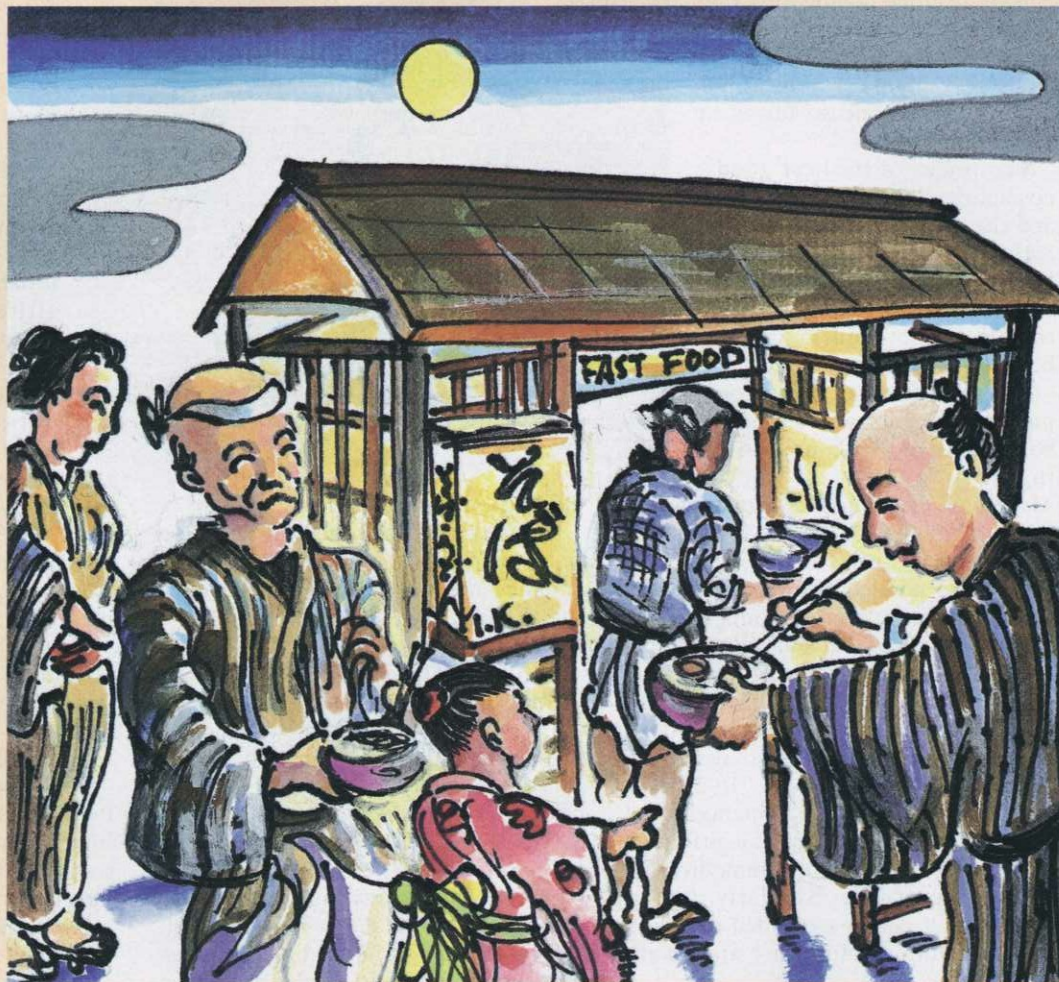
Article by Elizabeth Kiritani and illustrations by Kiritani Itsuo

Japan has invented some truly new concepts. Folding hand fans – a real necessity in summer here – are of Japanese origin. Their predecessors were the flat oval and bulky Chinese *uchiwa* fans. As O-Young Lee, author of *The Compact Culture: The Japanese Tradition of “Smaller is Better”* (Kodansha International, 1991) claims, Japan has centuries of experience redesigning and reinventing all manner of things by making them smaller, easier to use and more convenient.

The “modular” concept also dates back many hundreds of years in Japan. Tatami mats are an ubiquitous example. Room sizes were determined in set numbers of mats: 4 and a half mats; 6 mats; 10 mats, etc. A carpenter would know the exact layout of a building by being told the number of mats for each room. This modular housing concept was in use long before Levitt towns and modular housing hit the U.S.

Also, centuries before the Impressionists, abstract art flourished in Japan. The upper wall designs in Nijo Castle in Kyoto, the residence of Shogunate Tokugawa Ieyasu that was completed by 1603, has decorations of swirls and tiny square shapes that represent the wind and water in motion. The use of empty space was polished into a pervasive concept represented by the word *ma*. All this came long before “abstract art” was even dreamed of in the West.

Japanese design and comic books are originality themselves, but if you want to see something truly unique, take a



stroll through Tokyo’s modern areas of Shibuya or Shinjuku. You will witness a Cultural Revolution in the phenomenon of the *yamamba*. Teetering on 15 centimeter and higher platform shoes, these bone-thin girls are tanned to a chocolate hue that is intensified by white fluorescent eye shadow and white or black lipstick. Hair color ranges from shocking pink, yellow or green, and skirts are the mini-minimum. Enamelled long nails burgeoning with intricate designs, decorative cordless phones, false eyelashes and big bags are part of a look that is labor

intensive. The *yamamba* style requires full-time maintenance, much of which is done “installation style” in public places with flip back mirrors. It’s a style so extreme; it is nothing short of marvelous. I never tire of watching these eccentric fashion plates because each creates embellishments of originality, within the overall design scheme.

As most everywhere, Japan has incorporated a plethora of western ideas and items into its culture. Modern buildings follow western designs. Their concepts of *maihomu* (my home or owning your own house),

maika (my car), hip-hop styles and Barbie look alike dolls are formed in the spirit, if not reality, of the U.S. lifestyle. Even Japanese words like *tosuto* (toast), *haimisu* (high Miss, or old maid) and *hippu* (hip, a Japanese mistranslation for the buttocks) have their origins in the culture of the West.

Sometimes these western concepts take on peculiar forms, such as the recent stress on "volunteer activities," an idea foreign to Japan which has assumed the form of required activities forced upon students as a part of their school curriculum. Also, the practice of dispensing academic credits for "volunteer" work belies the fundamental idea of volunteering.

If you think this is a nation of copiers, though, next time you are in Japan, check out the local fast food hamburger joints and see what's on the menu. *Gobo* (burdock root) burgers. Rice burgers. Melon sodas.

The Japanese fish burger is a tidier spawn of fish and chips (hold the newspaper and much of the grease). Plus there are *teriyaki* burgers, *azuki* buns, rice balls, oolong tea ... and an arsenal of health and vitamin drinks made to bolster the flagging spirit or buttress a wavering constitution.

These exotic delicacies don't hold to the basic western tenets of fast foods. They sound healthy, for one thing. Healthful is not the appropriate spirit for fast foods whose tasty tidbits are meant to clog up the arteries, break out the face and pad some lard over those bones. Once you start in with something like a *gobo* burger (the three witches in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* would be pleased, a burdock root burger!), you've defiled the very idea of fast food with the exchange of fiber for grease. Yet a sizable number of those waiting in the fast food lunch-lines of Japan are "Waiting for *Gobo*."

Then there's coffee. A popular type of coffee here, other than the "blend" type, is called "American." When I first arrived here unable to read, write or even speak Japanese, every time Japanese ordered coffee at a coffee shop I was convinced that they were gossiping about me as they shouted to the waiter one after another "American, American."

Despite the name, though, and the

weakness of this American brew compared to the robust "blend" type, one small cup provides enough caffeine jolt to last you for most of a day. The U.S. brew is mild and watery and provides a friendly slow rev up. I can usually down three or four large cups with nary a jitter. The Japanese version is more of a jump-start.

These days we are ingesting our caffeine in Japan cheaper, faster and more conveniently at modern stand-up bars or on wobbly stools, by self-service or even on the go from a heated can. It stirs up a great sense of loss in me to watch how the Japanese now approach their coffee.

In Edo times (1603-1868) *kissaten* shops, then teahouses, were places for ordering kabuki tickets, engaging your favorite geisha or for having a clandestine meeting.

When Japan opened to foreign goods in the Meiji era (from 1868), however, coffee became an exotic treat from abroad, and suitable western-style environments were created in which to imbibe it.

When I arrived on the scene in 1979, it was the heyday of the *kissaten*. There were jazz coffee shops, puzzle coffee shops, railroad theme coffee shops. A Marie Antoinette palace served 900 yen cups of coffee in demitasse with delicate gold filigreed tripod



legs that fit into rococo saucers. We sat perched on spindle-legged Louis Quatorze chairs sipping sparingly and chatting lengthily. Glass figurines twinkled on tables and the service came in tuxedo with deep bows.

One of my favorites was a classical shop where strict silence was enforced. Customers were ushered into the twilight interior on tiptoe and handed a music menu along with its coffee counterpart. Bach's *Brandenburg Concertos* or some similar music gave us a cheery lift before the caffeine arrived.

Coffee shops had style. The business started declining about 17 years ago, and in just 10 years the number of shops in Tokyo dwindled by 30 percent. This still left us with around 10,000 *kissaten* to choose from in the Tokyo area, but it is now a business that has metamorphosed into something entirely different. Cheap cups of coffee in one-style plastic western-type surroundings now abound. The special environment is gone and the practice of lingering for an hour or more conversing over one small but expensive cup is dying. We are left with a self-service tray, more change in our pockets and chair legs scraping on linoleum.

Just as original as the former coffee shops of Japan, I think, is the Japanese rendition of fast food restaurants which are virtual health spas for the hungry. By the way, fast foods may have originally, in fact, been a Japanese concept. Way before the development of chain stores, fast foods have been proffered right on the street out of *yatai* carts and are morbidly healthy – steaming *oden* (boiled vegetables, eggs, fishcakes and seaweed in a soup) and buckwheat noodles.

And home delivery, which I had always assumed was an American concept, may have been pilfered from Japan where hundreds of years ago merchants carried their shops on their shoulders as they plied their trade through the streets of Edo (old Tokyo). I sometimes wonder whether the idea that Japan doesn't invent but only redesigns isn't a concept based on an ignorance of Japanese history. **JTI**

(This is the last article in this series.)

Elizabeth Kiritani is a newspaper columnist and an announcer for bilingual programs of NHK (Japan Broadcasting Corporation).

Her husband, Kiritani Itsuo, is an artist who has held exhibitions in several countries.