

Look East to Japan

By *Nora Marzuki*

The Look East Policy (LEP) was first introduced in late 1981 by Dato' Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, the Malaysian Prime Minister. His main aim was for Malaysians to emulate the positive values of Japanese society; to inculcate discipline, hard work, sound management techniques and learn advanced technology from Japan. The Prime Minister was impressed with the economic success of Japan. What made a country devoid of natural resources and devastated after World War II, develop into the world's second largest economy in less than five decades? There is no miracle and no magic formula. It can only be the Japanese people themselves, with their discipline, dedication, hard work and eagerness to improve and acquire new knowledge and technologies that have transformed the country into a developed nation. If an Asian country like Japan can do that, he was convinced that other Asian countries too could progress and be successful, if only we are prepared to learn.

Thus Japan became a model country and we are encouraged to learn from the Japanese.

When my husband was informed that he would be assigned to Japan, both of us were ecstatic. This is a country that neither one of us have ever set foot on. As for me, memories came flashing back, related to me by my grandparents and parents about their experiences with the Japanese during the Japanese occupation of Malaysia. But taking the cue from the new spirit embodied in the LEP, I was determined to observe and learn as much as possible about this country, so often referred to as the Land of the Rising Sun. I found out about this soon enough. A few months after my arrival, it was Ramadan when we Muslims have to fast from dawn to dusk. I had to get up so early in the wee hours of the morning to have my first meal before sunrise when my fast starts till sundown. Fortunately sunset was also at a decent time.

Since my arrival, many things have

caught my eyes, some fascinating and some amusing. What I would like to share with you here is beyond the conventional issues of trade or economy but my personal observations and feeling as a foreigner in Japan. One in particular is the discipline and patience of the Japanese people. Despite the masses of people in the cities and the sight of thousands of commuters at train stations during peak hours, there is complete order and harmony. Though everyone seems to be in a great hurry to get somewhere, there is no confusion. The people here do not mind spending more than an hour in the train and waiting patiently to arrive at their destinations. Back my home, it would be considered a torture.

The roads here might be narrow but the patient and polite drivers seldom get annoyed or honk angrily at another fellow driver or pedestrians. On the highways, motorists patiently inch their way in a massive traffic jam without losing their temper and there is hardly any queue jumping. I find queuing is only second nature to the Japanese. They queue for every occasion and everyone from the rich and famous to the ordinary city folks abide by this rule. Such discipline and civic consciousness is worthy of praise.

I am also intrigued by the Japanese manner of respecting time. As a wife of a diplomat, there are numerous functions that we have attended. No matter what function and how grand it was, it always starts on time with all the guests arriving well before the start of the event. Punctuality is firmly ingrained in Japanese society. The perfect timing of the arrival and departure of the *Shinkansen* is a classic example of how the Japanese strive for perfection and punctuality.

During my two and half years here, I have had the opportunity to accompany my husband to various prefectures and

Photo: Nora Marzuki



Ship-naming ceremony at Onomichi dockyard, Hiroshima Prefecture

Photo: Nora Marzuki



With my husband and the Malaysian cultural dancers from the state of Sabah that performed in Tokyo, March 2002

at times to small villages throughout the country. Everywhere we go, we were spoiled by the courtesies and respect extended by ordinary citizens. I could feel that there is tranquillity and harmony in society. The people avoid offending others by playing down their feelings or emotions, preferring to concentrate on creating harmonious, confrontation-free relationships. I could see that despite the numerous Buddhist sects, one hardly hears of conflicts arising from such differences. Nor do I often find the people openly expressing their anger or losing their temper unlike in many other countries. Doing so here is considered ill-mannered and childish. And then there is the practice of bowing which can be quite amusing at first. Soon one realizes that it is more than just a polite way of greeting. It is more to do with the respect extended to one another and this is expressed by the degree of the bow. This sense of respect is evident everywhere. Those who are not familiar will find it strange that workers at the train stations bow at the train after completing their job and primary school children bow to their school immediately after they leave the school gate.

Japan's steep awareness of its history and culture despite being a modern state is another trait that I find worthy of emulation. Not many nations have been successful in this regard. Like every other nation, Japan is proud of its national costumes, and the *kimono* is one costume that I really admire. It is one of the world's instantly recognizable traditional garments. The Japanese take pride in using different types of kimonos for different occasions and seasons. I realized that it was no easy task to put on the kimono let alone walking in it and trying the *obi* (sash) itself is an ordeal. Yet one could see the gracefulness of kimono-clad ladies demurely pouring cups of tea in tranquil cherry-blossomed temples or walking down the streets to attend special occasions like wedding ceremonies.

The Japanese people's strong desire to maintain its unique culture is also well reflected in their fondness of cele-

brating the country's festivals. Some of these festivals, dating back to ancient times, like the Gion Festival in Kyoto, are being celebrated with pomp and splendor to this day. Whether it is in a city, town or village one can expect at least one festival would be celebrated in a year. Sustaining one's own culture is becoming more important in today's era of globalization where the free flow of information could sap the foundation of one's culture if left unchecked. Although some of these Japanese festivals have their origins in ancient Shinto rituals and beliefs including acts of purification and offerings to the gods, for many foreigners like me, such festivals are very entertaining.

But I must confess here that the traditional custom of the Japanese husbands who courageously and willingly surrender their entire monthly salaries to their wives is certainly unique. Certainly, not many Malaysian men are willing to do this. My friends however are divided over this custom. One lady absolutely detests the idea that she had to manage the family budget as well as being a housewife, while the other friend adored the idea that she is the financial boss. One thing is certain though, that women are generally good at saving money and it is no small wonder that Japan's domestic savings rate is one of the highest in the world.

Last but not least, I find that the Japanese just love their food. Who can blame them, as the taste is unique. Japan has a wide variety of foods and some of the dishes like *sushi*, *sashimi* and *tempura* are famous worldwide.

The food is also tailored according to the four seasons. But what strikes me most is that the appearance is almost as important as the taste. Take for example my favorite Japanese cuisine, the *Kaiseki* meal. The food is not only simply delicious but is beautifully decorated. Such art of finesse in presentation and attention to details are often reflected in other aspects of life as well. Needless to say, the people here take pride in it. Whether the item is small, big, cheap or expensive, one could be assured that lots of care has been taken to turn it into a beautiful product most pleasing to the eyes. I for one would not mind paying a little extra for something that is elegantly presented.

For many people, the mention of Japan could conjure up different images but one thing is for certain, staying in Japan is truly an unforgettable experience. My two and a half years here have been mesmerizing and as the day passes by, there is so much more to discover, observe and learn. What I have touched above is just a few things that came to my mind as I write this paper. In no time, new and exciting experiences would soon be added to the existing list. It is my earnest hope that one day, I could share my experiences and the host of wonderful things that I have learned from looking east to Japan, with my people in Malaysia. **JTI**

Nora Marzuki is the wife of the Malaysian Ambassador to Japan.