

Japan Revisited

By Penni Chew

I first came to Tokyo twenty-five years ago. From the windows of the car from Haneda to Shibuya, I scanned the bleak, gray buildings and narrow streets crisscrossed by electric wires and I asked myself, "Can this really be Tokyo?" It did not conform to the "Fujiyama, cherry blossom, geisha" image of the Japan I had in mind. The contradiction I soon found in everything added to my disquiet. The old and the new, big and small, busy and quiet, attractive and ugly, they all seemed so ad hoc. I was surprised to see for example, the use of the abacus as well as the calculator in a modern bank. The brush and ink were used when the ballpoint pen was within reach. I came with the western logic that new is better than old and that modern technology is progress. When industry could create products that were not efficient, stronger, faster, why cling to the outdated? Why was a modern metropolis like Tokyo so unwilling to give up the old? This inability to connect what I saw and what I expected continue to disorientate me throughout my initial stay in Japan.

Tokyo in 1974 must have been one of the noisiest cities in the world. The pounding from piling, drilling and traffic and the incessant honking by impatient drivers was overwhelming. Added to that was the all-pervasive noise of the railway, rattling, accelerating, decelerating, shrieking to a halt. The *pachinko* parlors at every

street corner added to the jingle. All these above the shuffle of thousands of people thronging the streets, the place was literally throbbing. You had to shout to be heard. You have been out only for an hour, but you feel as exhausted as if you've been in a fish market all day. Indoors, a

singing, on their way to a public bath. And of course throughout summer, the singing cicadas made up the tapestry of daily noises.

I had my first Japanese meal in a restaurant above the Tokyu Department Store in Shibuya. It came in a box of several compartments with a lid. The contents were intended, no doubt, to provoke curiosity and admiration. There was a piece of carrot in the shape of a maple leaf, several pieces of boiled beans, rice molded into a triangular block, a piece of tofu with what looked like wood shavings on top and other things I could not name. There was also a piece of tuna, raw, which I quickly passed to my husband. He did not inform me that this was the *piece de resistance* and was only too happy to have it in my place. Everything was cold except the soup, which came without a spoon.

After a certain time, I made a sincere effort to throw overboard all prejudices concerning food. Consequently after a brief period of struggle I came to terms with sashimi. In fact, I felt I had taken steps towards connoisseurship till I was served a shrimp that was still wriggling. The thought of food made me miss Singapore. Used to variety and intensity I soon tired of the small range of taste in the Japanese cuisine. I craved for something beyond understatement. That was when I started learning to cook.



Tea ceremony utensils harmonize with the quiet of nature

constant stream of strident announcements through loudspeakers frees you from the need to talk.

There were, however, pleasing sounds that soon harmonized with my daily life. There was the chant of the *yakiimo* vendor who came nightly, pulling along his steaming cart lighted by lanterns. There was the rhythmic pounding of wood on asphalt when bathers wearing clogs walked by,

There were, however, things that I loved instantly - the bumpy misshapen pot, handmade paper, baskets, tea ceremony utensils, etc. It is an aesthetic of the simple and the quiet. I admired the ability to create beauty from the simplest products of nature. When synthetics dominate it is a joy to see natural material put to such use in the arts and crafts. The making of these simple yet ultra-refined objects involved highly developed techniques and I learned to respect the dedicated people who took pride in developing the techniques to make them.

Our move out of Tokyo after two years was rewarded with our stay in an old Japanese house in Kobe that truly was a sanctuary from the vexation of the world. Built almost entirely of wood, it was a masterpiece of unobtrusive elegance. We loved its simplicity and naturalness and the different texture in wood and matting. If I close my eyes I can still see the winding stone steps leading to the azalea bushes beyond the wooden sliding doors. I can still feel the gentle breeze that flows through the house, made cooler by the sound of the windchime. Living in such a dwelling place, however, was not always easy. In winter we froze. Freestanding kerosene burners were placed in each room and they had to be refilled from time to time. A kettle of water sitting on top of each acted as a humidifier. It was very old-fashioned, even at the time, and it was a fire hazard in a house built of wood and *tatami*. The beams were low and my husband kept knocking his head on them whenever he forgot to stoop. The shoji screens needed constant maintenance, as our year-old son would occasionally put his little finger through the paper. Then it was time to send for the driver with his supply of yellowed *washi* that matched the rest. All told, it was rather inconvenient and at times a real test of our patience. But all was made worthwhile when we treated ourselves to a long soak in the *o-furo*.

The house was one of the few old buildings outside Ashiya that had not succumbed to urban renewal. At a time when people sought to westernize, our choice to live in such

an austere place and our enthusiasm for old things was incomprehensible to our Japanese friends. We just kept buying old baskets and *tansu* which, incidentally, could have simply been picked off the road. Every third Tuesday, people discarded *tansu*, *hibachi* and other big items on curbs to be collected by dump trucks. Some "shameless" *gaijin* furnished their houses from this resource. You might say we were at the right place at the right time but alas, we couldn't bring ourselves to do the "right" thing.

Twenty-five years later, I returned to Tokyo to see many changes. Gone are the huge and garish cabarets. Love hotels are less visible. There is more order, more greenery, less cables, less noise and pollution and the drivers are much more courteous. Tokyo is a far gentler and more gracious place to live in now than a quarter of a century ago.

Many things have remained unchanged, thankfully. The same refined attention to details, the same strife for perfection, the same priority given to beauty. Practices uniquely Japanese still endure. For instance, at most stores, packages irrespective of their price, are still wrapped beautifully. I never appreciated this time and energy-consuming practice of wrapping humble objects till I understood that the motivation to do so is entirely personal. It is born of an ancient belief that all things have value whatever the price. Besides, is not time and energy well spent if it brings joy to others? The understanding of this philosophy made me re-examine my own value system.

This spirit of service can be seen again and again. My neighbor who not only sweeps the front of his house but also the public playground, our office janitor who voluntarily starts work at the crack of dawn. I doubt these men have lofty ideals when they go beyond the call of duty. Nor does the notion of "getting something out of it" ever occur to them. They do it

out of love and consideration for others, the same spirit shown when the storekeeper wraps two tiny pieces of chocolate in a small box tied with a ribbon. Such acts of generosity in a world demanding only speed and efficiency are extremely touching.

Though I am still perturbed by certain contradictions, I now see the relevance of the old alongside the new. The pen cannot entirely replace the brush. Each has its place. I also



Japanese food served in a box with several components

came to understand that it is only when we know something of the background that we can experience deep enjoyment and satisfaction. It is much like getting more pleasure out of an art exhibition when we know something of the art and the artist.

I doubt that one can live in Japan and not be changed in a profound way. Because its culture is so unique, Japan demands of all its sojourners a self-confrontation. It challenges us to re-examine our long held assumptions and beliefs of what we know to be the best, whether it is a personal philosophy, a value system or a sense of aesthetics. As for me, the learning process continues. And needless to say, my favorite cuisine today is Japanese. JTI

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