

# Thoughts on Life in Japan

By Philip Harper

I came to Japan at the age of 22. I arrived as a participant in the JET Program (me), an educational scheme run by various arms of the Japanese government, and fussily so printed in the heroic attempt to keep both the British and American contingents happy. Soon after I arrived, I ran a charity race by the Mukogawa River (Hyogo Prefecture), where I splashed 10 miles through the mud with one of the organisers. She was an athletic British woman, and she told me she had lived in Japan for 15 years. She might as well have said 15 centuries, it seemed such an unthinkable span of time then. Well, here I still am in Japan, and I have lived here now for 16 years. When I came, it was still the Showa Period (1926-1989), which is now ancient history, an object of nostalgia.

Lots of foreign people live in Japan – more with every passing year. The number has almost doubled since I arrived (although at just under two million that still leaves us comprising less than 2% of the population). Some come for purely economic reasons, some to pursue high cultural aims. The latter are called “*nihon-tsu*” (Japan connoisseurs) by their hosts. Probably most visitors fall somewhere between these extremes, enjoying the opportunities offered by what, even after the long recession, is still an enormous economy, and also the unique cultural environment.

Just as there are various motives for foreigners coming to Japan, so there are all shades of lifestyle. On the one hand, there are ex-pat communities which live in a peculiar virtual country, and put up a pretty good pretence that they are not in Japan at all. On the other, there are those *samue*<sup>1</sup>-wearing folk who aspire to a completely Japanese lifestyle, success in which endeavour gains them the title of “*henna gaijin*” (strange foreigner) from the natives.

Unlike the many foreign residents who came to Japan because of a love of some feature of Japanese culture, I

arrived utterly ignorant of everything from language to geography. I am sure that the first time I ever heard of Osaka was when I learnt I was being posted there before leaving the United Kingdom. However, though I arrived blissfully ignorant of Japanese life and culture, a whimsical fate saw to it that I ended up as a *sake* brewer. This has meant immersion in a purely “Japanese” environment. Japanese people often tell me that I am “more Japanese than the Japanese,” which is a mind-bending concept, when you stop to think about it. Anyway, though it has never been a goal of mine to “go native,” I am without doubt considered a *henna gaijin*.

If you should happen to want to experience an environment which is “more Japanese than Japan,” one method would be to find a time machine and go back a few decades to when western influence was less pervasive. However, you can achieve a very similar effect by entering one of a number of highly conservative professions. An apprentice carpenter or an aspiring *sumo* wrestler (or sake brewer) will, despite the very different nature of the work itself, move in similar frameworks, with a rigid vertical structure of seniority. All will work under a leader addressed as *Oyakata* or *Oyassan* (which means master or father). So, when I started working as a brewer, I was, in many respects, stepping into a time warp.

The people I worked with were veterans working to the seasonal rhythm that has sustained sake brewing for centuries, farmers who leave their homes after the autumn rice harvest to live and work in the brewery for the duration of the winter season. I found that seniority was strictly respected in traditional breweries. At meals nobody ate until the master brewer picked up his chopsticks: everything from the taking of baths to the reading of the newspaper took place in the order required



Fine water flowing, a minute's walk from the Daimon Brewery



A scene from the brewing season. The *koji* culture room is kept at above 30 degrees Celsius throughout the winter season.

Notes: 1) A two-piece kimono worn by some artists and craftsmen in Japan. Originally, working wear in temples.

by rank. The intense communal lifestyle meant that human relationships are vitally important to the success of brewing. If asked about the secret of making fine sake, many brewers will cite *wa* (harmony) in the brewery before even considering the technical business of brewing. It has been both an adventure and a privilege to experience life in a living tradition.

Apart from the challenges and satisfactions of brewing itself, an unexpected bonus has proved to be the buildings in which I work. In many communities, recent decades have seen Japanese-style buildings vanishing from the landscape: apart from the ubiquitous exceptions thankfully provided by shrines and temples, sake breweries (*kura*) are in many cases almost the only survivals. Many of the 1,500 working *kura* are still very much family-run businesses, and the instincts of many brewery owners are to protect the hoary buildings, just as they also play the role of guardians of local traditions.

Breweries included, architecture is one of the most beautiful features of Japanese life to me. There is an indescribable sense of peace and harmony in the simple lines and austere colours and textures of a traditional Japanese building. So it is with mounting dismay that I have watched for 16 years as one charming dwelling after another is demolished. In the past, another house in similar style would have risen from the ashes to bring the same simple but profound pleasure to my day with its tranquil charm. Now, however, the resurrection mostly occurs in the form of some pseudo-occidental horror looking like a giant portable toilet. For years, I assumed that no rational being would choose such a receptacle for their family, and that the rash of these tacky constructions on the face of Japan's communities reflected economic necessity. In short, I imagined that building in the traditional style was only possible for the rich. So it was a shock to me to hear from a Japanese builder that this is not, in fact, the case. He cited two reasons why these ugly edifices are so popular. One is the cutthroat and extremely successful sales techniques of the big firms specialising in these plastic homes. The man in question works for a firm keen to build in the traditional mould at reasonable prices. Yet, he says, even given the choice, many homeowners prefer the "western" style: for reasons I am unable to comprehend, Japanese people actually like it.

When I first lived in Osaka 16 years ago, one of my favourite spots was Chayamachi, five minutes' walk from Osaka Station. It was a miraculous survival of little houses, with lots of stone-flagged alleys leading off. These enchanting little side streets in the middle of the city made me homesick for the narrow granite-paved alleyways of the fishing villages of my home in the United Kingdom. In the shadow of the skyscrapers of central Osaka it was a unique and utterly charming oasis. Now, thanks to the developers, Chayamachi can boast a



The entrance to the Daimon Brewery

McDonald's and a TV game arcade, among other similar delights. In other words, the city of Osaka has traded in a unique landmark for a jumble of neon, concrete and plastic that could be any boring corner of any boring city in the world. It doesn't look like a good deal to me, though I expect the developers are happy enough.

Katano City, where I live and work, has a lot of relatively unspoilt corners. (The fact that it has its own supply of drinking water from the hills, and beautiful mountain woodland, also make it quite an anomaly in Osaka.) The company I work for has converted part of the brewery buildings into a restaurant, and customers arrive after walking between farmhouses with real live farmers in them. When they stand at the entrance, looking in on a Japanese garden in front of a 150 year-old wooden building, Japanese visitors' responses come in two patterns. One is: "What a surprise to find a place like this in Osaka." The other is one untranslatable word: "*natsukashii!*"<sup>2</sup> I have also noticed a standard response from non-Japanese visitors – especially those who have lived here for some time. With a sigh, they remark, "This is the Japan I thought I was coming to live in."

As the economic miracle grinds to a halt, the Japanese are faced with the problem of what to do next. Their greatest asset, the one product that cannot be copied or pirated or undercut, is also the one that they seem least able to see and value. It is simply that they are Japanese, and that this is Japan. The question is, how much of this unique resource (be it traditional arts and crafts or architecture) will they leave for the world – and future generations of Japanese – to enjoy? **JS**

Philip Harper is the only westerner practising as a sake brewer in Japan, he writes and speaks in English and Japanese to promote sake in the off-season. He has published *The Insider's Guide to Sake* (Kodansha International, 1998).

2) Roughly equivalent to "nostalgia."