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CONQUERING CULTURE SHOCK IN JAPAN

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by

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Abstract

This report focused on researching culture shock as it relates to Japanese culture and forming strategies for students to avoid it when studying abroad. The research was conducted in response to a perceived lack of information on how to deal with the differences between one's home country and Japan when studying abroad. The strategies were then tested when I spent one month studying in Japan, and revisions were made based on my experiences and the experiences of others.

Authorship Page

This report was written and researched by James Martineau.

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1 Introduction

Every year, college students across the United States set out for foreign countries to study abroad. Most of them bring back valuable, life-changing experiences and new ideas about multiculturalism, which they apply to their careers and lives to great benefit. Some, however, have difficulty adjusting to another culture; it may be vastly different from one's own, and as a result students may feel disoriented, lonely, and confused. If these students are ill prepared to face and understand this alien culture, the effects of the sudden environment change can be even more acute. These effects are collectively known as culture shock, and they can ruin an otherwise sublime experience in another country.

Some countries have more dissimilar cultures (with respect to the United States) than others. Perhaps chief among the complex and often misunderstood cultures in our global village is Japan. Though the United States and Japan have had a very close relationship since the end of World War II, there is still a great deal that Westerners may not realize about living and working there. Additionally, information regarding how to comfortably adjust to Japan can be hard to come by for college students wishing to study abroad. Many schools have departments for Asian Studies or Japanese in particular, but it seems that even in these, the most accessible and usable information comes in the form of individual teachers and students who have lived in Japan. As far as published, accessible information regarding Japanese culture goes, most current sources are business related, and do not include the kind of tips and examples of daily living that students need.

In order to help bring about a greater understanding and preparedness for myself and students like me who are looking to travel to Japan, I will seek out and collect information regarding the cause and prevention of culture shock in Japan and create a document written for students like me. This document will contain an analysis of coping methods and strategies for avoiding culture shock in Japan. These methods will be collected not only from existing literature, but verified and elaborated upon by personal experiences. I will travel to Japan in May of 2004 and test the methods out for myself. In addition, I will interview others who have spent time in Japan to try and find common strategies and observations that may be helpful to future students.

2 Literature Review

Creating a document that provides real strategies that will help students prepare for and deal with a study abroad trip to Japan required researching several main topics. First and foremost, Japan and its culture had to be studied. Secondly, culture shock, its causes, effects and remedies, needed to be researched. Since some of this information will be gathered from interviews, methods for creating interview questionnaires, interpreting results, and dealing with bias and error had to be researched. This research led to the formulation of a plan for creating and presenting the most important information to American students traveling to Japan.

2.1 Previous Research

There has been a great deal of research on Japanese culture as Japanese historians and foreign scholars alike have tried to define the distinct essence of the Japanese. The perspectives of each have tended to color the results of the work, especially with older studies, of which there are many.

Business guides represent one of the largest categories of the possible treatments of Japanese culture. As Japan completed its recovery from World War II and began its swift rise to economic power, foreign business became very important. As a result, many foreign writers created guides for Western businessmen. These guides give characteristics and explanations of Japanese behavior, especially as they relate to business practices and attitudes. Little is said about other aspects of the culture or how to live for extended periods in Japan, and the books focus mainly on dealing with Japanese businesspeople. Some prime examples of business oriented guides include The Japanese Mind: The Goliath Explained, by Robert C. Christopher, and various articles in professional journals, such as IEE Solutions, which give quick lists of tips and ways to avoid cultural faux-pas.

There is an equally large canon of Historical texts on Japan, ranging from its earliest development and prehistory to analyses of the most recent events. Like most historical treatments many of these books focus on the political figures and events of each time period and often give little information about who the Japanese people are or were at

the time and how they were influenced by events. Some do, however, and books like Japan: A Postindustrial Power, by Ardath W. Burks, include a section specifically addressing the question: who are the Japanese? Books like this offer many of the same points as the business guides, but usually include more justification and background behind the conclusions, since the goals are to elaborate on the historical influences rather than simply present the end results. Books of this nature are written by both foreigners and Japanese historians, and some of the latter have been prompted by a recent fervor of introspection and need for identity that Japan has undergone. Some Japanese historians have sought archaeological and historical evidence of a nearly unique and isolated cultural development of Japan's core cultural precepts. Taichi Sakaiya's What Is Japan is one such work. Additionally, sociological texts on Japanese national character have come about as a result of Japan's efforts to concretely identify itself and its culture.

Travel guides offer some help to students planning on visiting Japan, but are more utilitarian in what they have to offer. One authority in the field, Lonely Planet: Japan, offers information chiefly related to specific cities, attractions, and areas of interest throughout Japan, and contains only small sections on getting along in the culture or dealing with what makes Japan so different. Still, as a source of information on Japan they cannot be ignored.

The internet provides new sources of information on Japanese culture from many different areas. Private colleges, governments (of the United States, Japan, and others) and commercial websites all furnish information related to Japanese culture to sojourners. Japan-guide.com is one of the largest commercial websites devoted to information on Japanese culture and living in Japan. Much of what is provided consists of specific information: queries about travel, finding housing in Tokyo and other cities, etc. There are also sections on etiquette and cultural differences, however. The Japanese government's Ministry of Foreign affairs maintains www.isei.or.jp/, the website of ISEI, an organization that has been providing other countries with information about Japanese culture to other countries in an effort to debunk stereotypes and dispel myths about the Japanese.

The second important topic relating to this project is that of culture shock in general. The process of culture shock has been observed in a general sense by travelers from any country going to any other country, and the reactions, symptoms, and methods of dealing with it can apply generally to any country. There have been a large number of psychological and sociological studies of culture shock conducted, and several books and publications on the topic of overcoming and dealing with culture shock. One book actually addresses the topic of culture shock as it relates specifically to Japan. Living in Japan, by Joy Norton and Tazuko Shibusawa, describes the psychological process of undergoing culture shock and goals for changing to meet the foreign culture of Japan in a positive way.

Human resources can provide much needed real world experiences and information regarding behavior and expected treatment as gaijin in Japan. I will be interviewing my Japanese Professor, Alice Valentine, as well as several students from my class who traveled to Japan recently to study.

Alice Valentine is a full time professor of Japanese Language and Culture at Clark University. Having spent several years in Japan, she will provide an excellent resource in knowing what to expect. Her personal experiences in Japan, tempered with the knowledge she has, will provide a unique and insightful look at the Japanese people.

In order to properly gather and interpret the information gained through interviews, it is important to know how to properly conduct social research. Gaining information from groups of other people and drawing conclusions from that information is a difficult business and cannot be approached naively. Useful interviews can only be conducted after these information gathering basics are learned.

2.2 Techniques to be Mastered

Obviously having a deep understanding of Japanese culture will be necessary in order to complete this project. An analysis of what can (or cannot) be expected from the Japanese people and the social environment of Japan must be made. Cultural idiosyncrasies must be learned so that students can be made aware of them before

encountering them in the field. Myths, fallacies and stereotypes must be identified and debunked, to prevent students from making incorrect assumptions and preparing themselves in inappropriate ways.

A sound understanding of culture shock is necessary in order to help students overcome it. This includes knowledge of:

- What culture shock is
- How people are affected by culture shock
- How to recognize whether you are suffering from culture shock
- Steps to take to avoid and actively get rid of culture shock
- Reverse culture shock, and all above points with respect to it

Interviewing skills are required to properly acquire and interpret information from other people. Knowledge about social research will determine to what extent such information can be applied or verified.

2.3 The State of the Research Today

Today's research on Japan continues to redefine our thoughts and assumptions about the country as a whole. More than ever, old cookie-cutter observations and broad generalizations are being debunked and overturned, while at the same time shedding light on why such generalizations were made in the first place.

Especially with respect to the quick business guides and earlier histories/analyses of the Japanese people (and among them especially those written by foreigners), many books on Japanese culture made broad generalizations and assertive statements about who the Japanese people are or were and what made them tick. Much of this speculation occurred during Japan's momentous rise as an industrial economic giant, which fuelled the questions about what made the Japanese different. More current sources caution against such rash categorization of the Japanese and point to many mitigating factors, while at the same time giving a deeper look at how and why the Japanese appeared the way they did to the authors of the past. One prime example of just such a book is Modern

Japan, a newer (published 1998) look at the Japanese people that avoids sweeping statements while making insightful observations.

One interesting phenomenon in Japan today has been the Japanese people's fascination with defining and identifying precisely what it is to be Japanese, and what makes the Japanese different from other cultures of the world. This overwhelming urge to identify and explain Japan as a unique and wholly different culture has prompted many Japanese authors to make wild or unsubstantiated claims about the enigmatic and radically different nature of their culture, and back up these claims with equally unlikely reasoning.

When it comes to common cultural faux-pas and customs, information is both widely available and easy to acquire. The most current information is available online at commercial sites designed to help people living, working, or traveling in Japan. Travel guides, current publications for businesses, and some recent books can all provide similar tips on customs and practices that have remained current throughout the years.

2.4 Solving the Problem of Cultural Preparation: Existing Solutions

Most of today's students that intend to study abroad rely on their schools to provide cultural instruction and preparation. For the student that lacks such a resource, there are few options. Today's books can give a certain interpretation of Japan's culture, but depending on the author and age of the book, the lessons the student can come away with can vary wildly. Authors tend to make too many generalizations, especially in less recent books. The genre itself is greatly fuelled by two interests which tend to bias the information in ways unfavorable to the student hoping to experience Japan: a vast number of books are business inspired or geared, and another collection are written by Japanese authors vying to explain what makes Japan different and alien. Great caution and a wide selection of books to choose from can provide an adequate and informative picture, if approached with a skeptical mind.

Websites offer a more current source of information typically geared for the traveler or vacationer in Japan. Tips and cultural anecdotes typically deal with simple

day-to-day problems and conundrums: proper politeness, shoe conventions, eating and table manners, etc. Descriptions of the overall feelings and problems associated with long term stays in Japan are harder to come by. Since these commercial sites are aimed more towards tourists than students, they focus more on enjoying your stay and seeing the sights than on truly understanding the culture. No attempts are made to help students remember or retain the facts that they do present, and very little time is spent on the harmful affects of culture shock.

3 Research & Findings

This chapter provides the end result of our research into the topics of culture shock, the Japanese people, Japanese customs, etiquette and general knowledge, cross cultural teaching methods, and website design.

3.1 Culture Shock

This section contains information on culture shock. It details precisely what defines culture shock, lists symptoms and side effects, and provides information on how to recognize the effects of culture shock for what they are and combat them.

3.1.1 What Is Culture Shock?

The phrase “culture shock” was coined by anthropologist Kalvero Oberg in 1958. He described it as an “anxiety resulting from losing one’s sense of ‘when to do what and how’.” It is the result when one cannot anticipate events accurately, and finds oneself unable to bring about desired results in a new environment.

From the standpoint of behavioral psychology, culture shock is defined as a “maladaptive response to a new situation” which previous knowledge is inadequate to handle. In order to overcome these new situations, new skills must be quickly learned to overcome cultural deficiencies.¹

3.1.2 Symptoms of Culture Shock

Culture shock manifests itself in many different ways. Typically symptoms are anxiety related, and are accompanied by a lack of confidence, inventiveness and spontaneity. Sufferers may become excessively angry over minor problems which normally wouldn’t have bothered them in a home environment. Others may respond by retreating from the new environment, spending large amounts of time sleeping, reading, or engaging in other activities that serve as an escape from the present situation. Some

¹ Joy Norton and Tazuko Shibusawa. *Living in Japan* (Boston: Tuttle Publishing, 2001), 8.

travelers develop an extreme distrust of people in the foreign culture, fearing that they are being taken advantage of without their knowledge (this usually occurs in those who cannot speak the local language).²

In addition to the anxiety and mental stresses associated with culture shock (and perhaps as a result of them), physical maladies have been known to appear. Clinical depression, nausea, and headaches have been associated with culture shock, as well as various sleep disorders.³ Susceptibility to disease may actually increase when a traveler is exposed to viruses the body is unfamiliar with, although this could only be viewed as culture shock in a purely biological sense.⁴

There are two typical maladaptive behaviors that travelers, especially long-term ones, experience upon arrival in a foreign country. The first is to “go native”. Enthusiastic travelers and scholars spending extended periods of time in the country of their study may idealize the culture, falling in love with every aspect of it upon arrival. Travelers may even reject aspects of their own culture as they completely embrace their new environment. They find themselves depressed and disillusioned, however, when their idealized concept of the foreign culture inevitably fails to compare to the reality of their new environment.

The second typical maladaptive response to a new environment is to fail to embrace the new culture, and to attempt to continue living life as if one were at home. This is a recipe for disaster, however; no matter how hard one tries to recreate a homelike environment and remain there, refusing to interact, the alien culture cannot be completely shut out. Eventually those who take this road are forced into exposure to the new culture against their wishes.⁵

Enthusiasm and optimism about a new culture can help one to avoid some of the more obvious difficulties associated with adapting to a new culture (lacking the desire to

² Ibid., 9.

³ Katherine Schneider, “Cultural Differences.” University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire Counseling Services, 2004, <<http://www.uwec.edu/counsel/pubs/shock.htm>> (24 Feb 2004), Sec. 2.

⁴ Norton and Shibusawa, Living in Japan, 9.

⁵ Norton and Shibusawa, Living in Japan, 14.

adapt is sure death for any cultural learning experience). Regardless, emotional ups and downs have been observed in almost all individuals traveling abroad. Rhinesmith's Ten Stages of Adjustment are one of many models of these ups and downs. Other researchers use one large U shaped curve, although usually they note that ups and downs occur throughout the process.

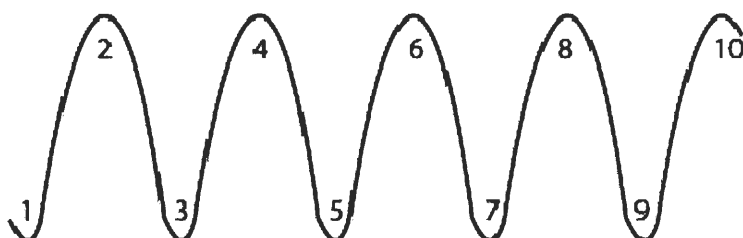


Figure 1: Rhinesmith's Ten Stages of Adjustment

1. initial anxiety
2. initial elation
3. initial culture shock
4. superficial adjustment
5. depression-frustration
6. acceptance of host culture
7. return anxiety
8. return elation
9. re-entry shock
10. reintegration⁶

While many of the ill effects of culture shock sound obvious, it is often difficult to identify them to the individual. Many travelers assume something else is bothering them, or convince themselves nothing is wrong. The first step towards beating culture shock is understanding when one is suffering from it.

3.1.3 Recognizing Culture Shock

In order to effectively adapt to one's new surroundings and learn the cultural skills necessary to not only survive, but to thrive in a new land, one must be wary of culture shock and ready to change. Adapting and expanding oneself is the goal of any

⁶ "Culture Shock," *Study Abroad Safety Handbook*, n.d., <<http://www.usc.edu/dept/education/global/education/global/studentsabroad/cultureshock.html>> (24 Feb 2004), Sec. 1.

cultural experience, and successfully adjusting to a new culture means changing. It is important to recognize how we're dealing with change, whether we're resisting or accepting proactive change, and if we're dealing with our environment in a negative way.⁷

The importance of constant evaluation of one's feelings during a stay in a foreign country is evident when one considers the human mind's tendency toward using defense mechanisms. Defense mechanisms are unconscious coping methods employed by the mind to help deal with stress. There are a variety of defense mechanisms, both helpful and harmful. With careful observation some can be nurtured while others are avoided.

So-called adaptive defense mechanisms enable one to bear difficult situations with no harm to oneself or to others. These positive means of dealing with stress manifest themselves in many different ways. Humor is one example of an adaptive defense mechanism; the ability to laugh at one's mistakes or difficulties and see the bright side of things is far healthier than worry and regret. Another example of adaptive defense mechanisms at work is known as sublimation, defined as the channeling of stressful feelings into constructive activities, such as community service work or simply a relaxing walk.

Maladaptive defense mechanisms distract one from facing one's feelings, robbing them of the opportunity to change a bad situation or mindset into a good one. While they are an unconscious manifestation of the mind attempting to protect itself from harm, they can be recognized by oneself and others if one knows what to look for. Common maladaptive defense mechanisms include:

- *Displacement*: when one displaces feelings and emotions by taking things out on someone/something else instead of directly addressing problems. Anger or other emotions are displaced, and taken out on an unrelated person or thing.
- *Projection*: negative traits and behaviors about oneself are "projected" onto another. One's irritation is seen in others instead of oneself.
- *Rationalization*: when one finds false justifications for personal actions. One may make excuses for avoiding certain situations or for acting in certain ways.

⁷ Norton and Shibusawa, Living in Japan, 68-69.

- *Denial*: a refusal to be aware of an external problematic situation. When in denial, one refuses to even consider the situation in question.
- *Repression*: a refusal to be aware of an *internal* problematic feeling or thought. Repressed emotions still exist in the subconscious and may manifest themselves in unforeseen ways.⁸

It is important to remember that recognizing and discouraging defense mechanisms can be extremely difficult, since they are an unconscious act. For this reason it is very helpful to have an objective third party to observe and point out what one may miss about oneself. Sharing your feelings with others who are sympathetic or undergoing the same stress can help greatly in the process of coping and in uncovering one's feelings. A "share buddy", a single close friend who can help identify masked feelings and understand one's problems, is a very potent aid in this case.⁹

3.1.4 Dealing with Culture Shock

One of the best defenses against culture shock is prevention through preparation. Since culture shock is the result of not knowing what to do in what situation, finding out what to do beforehand takes culture shock out of the picture. Of course, every possible situation cannot be prepared for, but every aspect of a new culture that can be made familiar before jumping into a new environment can help in the adaptation process.¹⁰

There are many activities that can be undertaken in any foreign country which are positive and good for the adaptation process. One of the most important of these is the forging of new relationships.¹¹ There are many different types and levels of relationships, and a wide breadth of these is important for overall well being and growth in any environment. Since one is initially alone in a foreign country (with the exception of fellow travelers or students) one must set out to form new relationships as soon as possible. Casual relationships, such as those one might have with a local shopkeeper, can be just as important as deep relationships, or anything in between.¹²

⁸ Norton and Shibusawa, *Living in Japan*, 71-72.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 73.

¹⁰ Katherine Schneider, "Culture Shock," Sec. 3.

¹¹ Charlotte Thomas, "Take the Shock out of Culture Shock," *Peterson's Study Abroad Advice*, 2003, <<http://www.petersons.com/stdyabrd/abroad4.html>> (24 Feb 2004), Par. 14.

¹² Norton and Shibusawa, *Living in Japan*, 84.

Other constructive activities include exercise. Exercise is important for overall health in any environment, but it is also a great way to get out and explore one's new environment at the same time. Walking especially is a great exercise for those who are in a new place. Keeping a journal is another constructive activity. Journals aid in the identification of cycles in behavior and feelings by providing a temporal record of events, and are a place to record thoughts and feelings completely uncensored. This can be cathartic for those who have a hard time expressing their feelings to others. With the help of a journal, one can verify and accept personal elements one may wish to hide (or already be hiding via defense mechanisms). Lastly, the observation of rituals has been found to be an important aid in providing stability, continuity, direction, and meaning to life. A "ritual" in this case is any repeated, predictable behavior that is in some way meaningful. From attending religious services to making breakfast a certain way every morning, rituals can provide much needed anchorage to activities and locations.¹³

If one is suffering greatly from culture shock and cannot find solace in any of these activities, there are often places where foreigners can get help. In Japan specifically, there are numerous support groups, which can be located through foreign schools or embassies. If one is completely alone and in need of help, there is even a service called TELL (the Tokyo English Life Line), a non-profit organization providing free help to English-speakers in Japan.¹⁴

3.1.5 Reverse Culture Shock

Reverse Culture Shock, the term for suffering from culture shock upon returning home from a foreign country, is a similar yet different dilemma that can catch even the seasoned traveler unaware. Sufferers may find themselves bored, lethargic, or have trouble starting up new jobs or projects in their home country. It can sneak up on travelers because culture shock is something that's expected when one is going away to a foreign land, but not when returning home. This is because people often don't realize that in dealing with culture shock abroad, they themselves have changed in various ways. In coping with the new experience they may find new differences fitting into their old

¹³ Norton and Shibusawa, Living in Japan, 76.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 88.

environment. Those in the grips of reverse culture shock may also have trouble finding people to talk to, since even friends and family may have trouble maintaining interest and empathy with respect to the traveler's experiences, none of which were shared by those who remained at home.

The best defense against reverse culture shock is known as "the work of worrying". Thinking about certain aspects of home before returning can mentally prep someone for the changes they will face. By pondering a list of questions well in advance of the trip back, they can get into the mindset they need to adapt to home. The questions are as follows:

- What won't have changed about my home while I've been gone?
- What will have changed?
- What do I wish will have changed?
- How have I changed?¹⁵

All of the above behaviors, exercises, and mindsets can help a person to adapt constructively to their new home and make positive life changes that enable them to function and thrive. They work as well in any alien environment as they do in Japan. There is one practice, however, which is very specific to Japan: learning as much about the culture as you can. In order to prepare oneself as much as possible to enjoy Japan rather than wrestle with its differences, one must try to understand the new world they'll be traveling to.

¹⁵ Ibid., 98.

3.2 Who Are the Japanese?

Students on their way to Japan would do well to ask themselves the questions regarding just what Japan is like, how it's different, and what they should expect. The process of finding concrete answers is very difficult, however. Definitive information tends to be too broad. Generalizations can blind a traveler to the obvious diversity and richness present in most every country. On the other hand, all cultures have certain mores, customs, and aspects that make them a unique and distinct part of the globe. A balance must be struck somewhere in between avoiding generalizations and defining a country's people by its culture, and it turns out that finding that balance with respect to Japan is very difficult. Even the Japanese have a hard time describing what it is to be "Japanese".

3.2.1 Japan's Search for Self Identity

It has been said that "The Japanese are themselves obsessed with the veritable fad of Japanese introspection."¹⁶ But why should the citizens of a country rich in ancient culture wonder aloud who they are, and how to define their own nationality? Japan has had many identity crises, and many events have led Japanese to question what is Japanese about their lives and what is the result of foreign influence.

The question of what "Japaneseness" really is is not a new one. In 1888, some Japanese feared that the Western influences of the Meiji Restoration would erase Japanese culture and supplant it with copies of Western civilization. A magazine called "The Japanese" was created, which sought to define what it is to be Japanese and develop particular Japanese values based on the aesthetic sense rooted in the natural environment that many Japanese cultivated. Attempts were being made to save Japanese culture and at the same time, to pin down what it was.¹⁷

Japan has been known as a great borrower and assimilator of foreign ideas, practices and techniques, and for this reason there are questions about what is truly Japanese and what has been borrowed, or whether borrowed culture becomes indigenous

¹⁶ Ardath W. Burks, *Japan: A Postindustrial Power*, (Boulder: Westview Press, Inc., 1991), 2.

¹⁷ Andrew Gordon, *A Modern History of Japan*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 111-112.

if its practitioners adjust it to fit their own particular needs. During the Meiji period Japan strove to turn in its Asian status for European, and felt it was lagging behind the civilized world. After military success in the early 1900s the pendulum swung back and Japanese nationalism soared, growing tragically into a situation whose result was the Pacific war. After defeat in World War II another great crisis set in within the Japanese mind. A sort of “national inferiority complex” set in after the defeat, prompting more questions about whether a true, proud, unique Japanese culture existed and what it was.¹⁸

Thus the modern cottage industry (a multi-million dollar one – it’s a large cottage) of *Nihonron* – the theory of Japanese society – came into existence. Now numerous books and theories by Japanese scholars abound. The mildest versions of these assert Japanese uniqueness, and the most extreme are truly unfounded in their claims. The unique position of many of these Japanese authors makes them a difficult source for the American student. Bias must be watched for in every paragraph.¹⁹

3.2.2 Foreign Scholar’s Contribution to *Nihonron*

There are numerous books on Japanese history, culture, and development written by Western authors. American, English-reading students will tend to come across more of these than the Japanese authors’ accounts in most public libraries. These, too, have their caveats: a great deal was written about Japanese business practices in the latter half of the 20th century, as Japan rose in economic status to an industrial power. During this time Japan was the only Asian country advancing with such speed, and as Japan began to compete with American and European businesses, Westerners sought reasons why. Japan developed along different channels than many Western nations, and was unique among Asian countries. People wanted to know what made Japan so different. Thus the “Special Case Theory” developed (and was largely encouraged by the Japanese).²⁰ Foreign writers wanted to know what made the Japanese so different, and they went looking for answers. Naturally, they found them. Many older guides to Japanese development and culture written by foreign scholars are full of broad generalizations about the Japanese people.

¹⁸ Taichi Sakaiya, What Is Japan? Contradictions and Transformations, (Kodansha International, 1995) *xix*.

¹⁹ Burks, Japan: A Postindustrial Power, 182.

²⁰ Sakaiya, What Is Japan?, *xix*.

They described a mysterious, enigmatic race, a closely-knit family of island people specially designed, it seemed, for industrial dominance. While their observations certainly didn't come from nowhere, they tend toward statements that are too assertive and too sweeping in their categorization of the Japanese people, especially by today's standards.

3.2.3 The Foreign Enigma

One common thread throughout much of the literature about Japan is the country's sheer uniqueness, the staggering magnitude of its contrary, complicated nature. Indeed, many Japanese believe that true understanding of Japanese culture rests in the sole purview of those who are born and raised Japanese. Sadly, this has proven a potent barrier to intercultural exchange, and not because the belief is true, necessarily, but simply because it exists. Japanese internationalization (and therefore greater acceptance of other cultures) has not been hindered by lack of exposure to the rest of the world, but by the long held belief that only Japanese can understand their own culture.²¹

Certainly Japanese culture is very different from much of Western culture. "Even a person highly familiar with both cultures must make a conscious effort to bridge the gap," says author Robert Christopher, who is, of course, referring to an individual who is Japanese, and has learned Western culture, not the other way around.²² But is it all so unique and enigmatic that Westerners will never get it? If Japan has borrowed so much from other cultures, what makes it "unique"?

Ardath Burks, author of Japan: A Postindustrial Power, writes that Japanese culture is itself difficult to discern because of its "admixture of a strong indigenous nonabsorbent core of Japanese culture, which is like igneous rock, and the strong external layers of alien culture, which are like sedimentary deposits."²³ Despite those deposits, many proponents of Japanese uniqueness assert that Japanese culture developed in near isolation, growing on its own into the mysterious world it is today.

²¹ Norton and Shibusawa, Living in Japan, 7.

²² Robert C. Christopher, The Japanese Mind: The Goliath Explained, (New York: Linden Press, 1983), 38.

²³ Burks, Japan: A Postindustrial Power, 34.

It is true that compared with many countries, Japan developed in *relative* isolation. Japan's geography and location limited its contact with other countries and helped discourage invaders. In fact, aside from Kublai Khan's failed attempt to invade in 1274, the United States is the only foreign power to have held sway in Japan in all its history. This is significant in that most of the culture Japan absorbed from other nations was absorbed voluntarily rather than through forced exposure to a conquering army or unwanted visitors. This does not mitigate the fact that Japan has borrowed heavily from other cultures; there was a veritable frenzy of Chinese influence in during the 6th-9th century. Before that, rice arrived from China around 2nd century BC, and metalworking, language ideographs, weaving, tanning, and other skills followed circa 370 AD.²⁴ However, since the Japanese chose what they wanted and ignored the rest, they were careful to "Japanify" much of what they took for their own. There were also significant times in Japan's development when foreign influence was waning or even nonexistent. During the Tokugawa period, amid self imposed isolation from the world, Japan experienced some of its greatest cultural growth.²⁵

Depending on one's point of view, Japan can be seen as having been shaped primarily by outside forces or by internal development. External influence stresses the overwhelming influence from China in the 6th-9th centuries, Christian influence in the 16th and 17th, Commodore Perry's arrival and the following Meiji Restoration in 1868, and the American Occupation and rebuilding after World War II. Internal proponents point out the foundation period in Japan before significant Chinese influence, the changes that took place under Tokugawa before Commodore Perry arrived, and the rise in growth and consumption that occurred *after* the Americans had left Japan to itself, not before.²⁶ The truth is surely somewhere in between.

However, the Japanese didn't just borrow – they combined, refined, and permutated what they absorbed in new and unique ways. Religion is a prime example. The Japanese began with their own nature worshipping religion, Shinto, and successfully added Buddhism and Confucianism without conflict. Some even absorbed Christianity

²⁴ Burks, Japan: A Postindustrial Power, 19-20, 34

²⁵ Christopher, The Japanese Mind, 45-47.

²⁶ Burks, Japan: A Postindustrial Power, 3.

without denying their previous philosophies. The parts may be borrowed, but the sum total certainly isn't. What's more, while Buddhism waned in Asia, Japan developed its own sects and monasteries, which grew powerful and vied for influence. This played a part in the fracturing of Japan into feudal states led by a new warrior class, the samurai, who championed Zen Buddhism, a variant that was decidedly different and at once perfectly suited to Japan's new developments.²⁷

In the end, it's clear that Japan has a rich and varied culture all its own. It is not clear, however, that Japanese culture can only be understood by the Japanese. Japan may be the most different place an American student could possibly choose to study, but nonetheless, there seems to be no magical barrier preventing understanding. The attitudes of some Japanese may make it more difficult – but without evidence, believing in those attitudes simply contributes to a self-fulfilling prophecy of unconquerable mystery. The question then arises: what is it about Japanese culture that brought about these attitudes in the first place? It may not be absolutely unique, but there must be some startling things to make it seem so daunting to so many scholars and laymen alike.

3.2.4 Answering the Question

The question “Who are the Japanese?” implies generalization. Of course, “the Japanese” are a group of over 120 million people – there's no single answer. Therefore, one must ask, are there traits, behaviors, or mannerisms that are common among a significant portion of the population? If so, then knowing what those commonalities are may be useful for travelers to Japan. Extreme care must be taken with how one uses this knowledge, however. If one goes to Japan expecting to find people who act and think a certain way, chances are he or she will misinterpret plenty of behaviors and actions to fit expectations, deluding themselves about a diverse culture and perpetuating old myths. An awareness of statements that have been made about the Japanese, as well as statements the Japanese have made about themselves, is useful in its own right. It may be impossible to avoid thinking in terms of generalizations when it comes to the unknown; it may be impossible to clear one's mind of expectations.

²⁷ Burks, Japan: A Postindustrial Power, 35-39.

The following are observations made by different people, at different times, of different groups and individuals throughout Japan. They are offered as a record of what may have come before, not what is. Connecting with and getting to know the people of the world firsthand is left as the ultimate endeavor of any world traveler, and it is hoped that all such travelers embark upon their journeys with open minds.

Disclaimers aside, the concept of a common thread among the Japanese is very popular. This common thread is referred to as national character, and it does not apply strictly to the Japanese. National character is defined by Alex Inkeles, Senior Fellow at Stanford's Hoover Institution and expert in social psychology, as a group of "relatively enduring characteristics and patterns that are modal among adult members of a society".²⁸ These patterns have emerged as national averages in widely administered questionnaires. "National averages always obscure individual differences," writes Ardath Burks, but "they are persistent and subjectively important" despite this. He adds as a less scientific observation that "If there is any group of people about whom generalization in terms of national character can be made, it is the Japanese."²⁹

What are these generalizations of which Mr. Burks, and many others, speak? The main group of traits, which are at once the root of many other supposed traits and the end result of many theories of Japanese cultural development, involves group orientation. Group orientation includes concern for and membership in a group or groups, be it family, company, or country (and usually all three).³⁰ A respect for the opinions and consensus of the entire group is necessary. As a consequence of such deference to the group, individual self assertion is discouraged, and "individual self gratification at the expense of the collective welfare" is among the worse things one can do.³¹ This is reflected in some Japanese phrases. *Ippiki Ookami*, or "lone wolf", refers to loners; the phrase connotes selfishness and untrustworthiness. The saying *derukuri wa utareru* translates roughly to

²⁸ Ibid., 167.

²⁹ Ibid., 165-169.

³⁰ Ibid., 172

³¹ Christopher, *The Japanese Mind*, 53.

“the nail that sticks out is hammered down” – indicating that most of those who might become *ippiki ookami* are guided back to group mores and values, at least in theory.³²

Another effect of group orientation is a reticence with respect to outward conflict and a desire for harmony (or at least the appearance of harmony). This is a natural extension of the consensus concern, the desire that all group members should agree on a course of action or major decision. Again, the language and mores with respect to politeness may reflect this tendency to some degree. It is generally somewhat rude to respond to a question of opinion or taste with a flat “no” response when someone suggests something, or gives their opinion on something and then asks yours. Disagreement is allowed, of course, but politeness demands a more tactful, less openly negative answer, to preserve the semblance of agreement and harmony.³³

Perhaps also a result of the group orientation, humility has been observed in the language and mores of the Japanese. A tendency towards self deprecation when complimented, or refusal when offered gifts, even if purely a token resistance, is required by the rules of etiquette. Accepting praise openly, or even worse, praising oneself, may be thought of as conceited.³⁴ If it does indeed stem from group orientation, then the rationale is that praising oneself or taking individual credit for achievements reduces the harmony of the group because it seems to imply that one individual may be better than the others.

The group focus naturally takes away from the perceived importance of the individual. Pressure to conform to the mores and values of the group is said to be very great at times, and one Japanese liberal arts authority, Dr. Kazutaka Watanabe, even goes so far as to equate the choice to be individual with “overcoming the dark, gray social pressure that seeks to smother [the Japanese’] personal selves.”³⁵

3.2.5 Why Group Orientation?

³² Dean Engel and Ken Murakami, *Passport Japan*, (World Trade Press, 1996), 15.

³³ Boye Lafayette De Mente, *How to Do Business With the Japanese*, (Lincolnwood: NTC Business Books, 1987), 20-29.

³⁴ De Mente, *How to Do Business With the Japanese*, 60.

³⁵ Sakaiya, *What is Japan?*, 45.

If these observations were accurate when they were made, the causes for these behaviors and mores still remain unclear. Nearly every author cited in this paper had a separate reason for precisely why the Japanese are the way they supposedly are. De Mente explained that Feudalism, Buddhism, and Confucianism taught that the individual should become one with the group rather than expressed as a separate entity.³⁶ Engel and Murakami also blame the feudal era, when much depended on the membership in and protection of a small group.³⁷

Robert C. Christopher suggests that, among other things, the Japanese may have a nationwide vulnerability complex and view themselves as disaster prone after suffering through the hardships of World War II and living in an area where natural disasters abound. This along with the impression that the foreign governments of the world may be trying to impose themselves on Japan or hoodwink them in some way causes them to feel that they are all on the same team, united against the powers that be.³⁸

Taichi Sakaiya blames a great deal of the lack of individuality and uniform personalities he perceives in the Japanese population on the school systems, which he believes are designed primarily to produce a uniform, indistinct laborer to power the Japanese industrial machine. He states that “the postwar Japanese has been through an educational system that extinguished their individuality and turned them into clones suited to the mass-production workplace”. These education systems are designed by the bureaucrats to eliminate defects rather than develop talents, focusing on shoring up weaknesses to reach a standard proficiency and allowing natural strengths and interests to languish. This standardized, vanilla education is more receptive to the demands of industrial labor.³⁹

It is possible that all the above factors play some part in forming the attitudes of today’s Japanese. However, the most reasonable explanation for group orientation in Japan, as well as its Asian neighbors, is wet rice cultivation. This labor intensive activity required relatively large numbers of people to build and repair irrigation systems as well

³⁶ De Mente, How to do Business With the Japanese, 93.

³⁷ Engel and Murakami, Passport Japan, 15.

³⁸ Christopher, The Japanese Mind, 52.

³⁹ Sakaiya, What is Japan?, 19, 36-37.

as plant and harvest the rice. In this respect, Japan is not alone nor is it unique. In fact, countries with the geography and climate of many of the settled areas in ancient China required much larger groups with greater coordination, giving rise to the so-called “hydraulic empire”, since the need for massive group coordination arose out of the necessity for complex irrigation systems. Japan’s mountain streams did a great deal of the work for the Japanese, and so such large, cohesive groups were unnecessary.⁴⁰

3.2.6 Breaking the Mold

Even assuming the observations made above are accurate for a large number of Japanese, it is clear that as time marches on, Japan is becoming more and more individualized, more and more aware of foreigners’ ability to understand them, and more international in every respect.

Japanese may be more group oriented as a whole than other cultures, but that doesn’t mean that they all enjoy it all the time. Many Japanese speak out against the pressure to conform in such groups, and against the many obligations that such memberships entail. The youth, especially, is far more ready and able to express their individuality than each previous generation.⁴¹

Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi articulated the current direction in which he would like Japan to go on January 19, 2004:

The society which we strive to realize is one in which each and every person, as well as the regions and companies take on principle roles and where the individual efforts are rewarded... Knowledge and innovative ideas produced at the workplace are the means that will exert Japan’s potential.⁴²

⁴⁰ Harold R. Kerbo and John A. McKinstry, Modern Japan, (Boston: McGraw Hill, 1998), 22.

⁴¹ Engel and Murakami, Passport Japan, 15.

⁴² “Lookout Post,” Look Japan, Mar 2004, 2.

Thus, the best answer to the question “Who are the Japanese?” may not be a description of behaviors and thought patterns, but the simple fact that they are a people who are continually asking that very same question. A traveler must therefore prepare himself to encounter the old and the new, “expected” and “unexpected” (whatever they happen to be in their mind). Japan is a very ancient country steeped in tradition, yet continually changing, augmenting, and redefining itself in the most literal sense. With this well-defined uncertainty, a traveler might come to accept the seeming contradictions of Japan with the greatest ease.

3.3 Customs, Etiquette, and General Knowledge

The following guides contain a core of interesting and useful facts regarding etiquette and customs that students would do well to acquaint themselves with.

3.3.1 What to Bring With You

In addition to the essentials that any traveler would carry with them on a trip abroad, certain items are either difficult to find or very expensive in Japan. You might want to consider bringing some or all of the following items with you (if your trip will be short enough that you won't run out) or thinking up alternatives before you leave. Finding yourself stuck in Japan without some of these supplies might cause undo stress and strain, and you want your settling in period to be as smooth as possible.

Toiletries:

- Antiperspirant – While deodorant is available in Japan, antiperspirant is not. Bring your own, especially if you're visiting in the summer.
- Fluoride Toothpaste – Most Japanese toothpaste is fluoride-free. If you must have fluoride, bring your own along.
- Shower gel – Since it is overpriced in Japan, you may want to consider bringing your own.

Medical Supplies:

- Contraceptives – Birth control pills were legalized recently (1999) in Japan, and are available in some stores, though they are very expensive. It is recommended that you bring a supply with you (talk to your doctor about the feasibility of this) and be sure to bring prescription notices and notes from your doctor in case you run into trouble at customs (you should supposedly only import one month's supply of any given prescription drug into Japan). Condoms may present their own problem – size may be an issue for foreigners. It's best to bring your own.

- Cold/Flu Medicines – These are available but costly. Be careful with imports, however; stimulants such as pseudoephedrine, found in Sudafed, are illegal in Japan.

Miscellaneous:

- Clothes - If you're a larger than average Westerner (or even an average sized one), you may have some trouble finding clothes that fit, or at least a smaller selection than you're used to. This size shift carries over into shoes and even women's underwear.
- Adapters – Power adapters shouldn't present too much of a problem for Americans – Japanese outlets are very similar to America's in most respects. Still, check on the adapters you have to run your equipment and make sure they are sufficient.
- Towels – Like the clothing selection, Westerners may find Japanese towels too small. Bringing along appropriate ones is a good idea.⁴³

3.3.2 Getting Around & Getting Along

Public Toilets

Public toilets in Japan are a little bit different than most Americans may expect. Japanese-style toilets are not made to be sat on, but are rather squatted over instead. This could understandably take some getting used to. If a public toilet does not appear to have a seat, don't kill yourself trying to sit down – it's not designed for it.⁴⁴

Toilet paper is not always provided in public restrooms. This is not much of a problem, however, since tissues are distributed freely in many areas of Japanese cities. In pedestrian-heavy areas, people specifically hired for the purpose pass out packages of tissues for free – the packages have advertising on them and are therefore distributed to whoever will accept them.⁴⁵

⁴³ Eve Chian ed., "Plan for Japan 1999," 3-4.

⁴⁴ [Japan-guide.com](http://www.japan-guide.com/e/e2003.html), n.d., <<http://www.japan-guide.com/e/e2003.html>> (4 May 2004).

⁴⁵ [Japan-guide.com](http://www.japan-guide.com/e/e2012.html), <<http://www.japan-guide.com/e/e2012.html>>

Likewise, paper towels and hand dryers are not always available. Unfortunately there are no people on the street passing out towels, so you may want to carry a handkerchief with you in case you find yourself with soggy hands and nothing to dry them on. If you do, however, remember that the handkerchief is *only* to be used for hand drying. Blowing one's nose or sneezing into a handkerchief is deplorable in Japan (for rather acceptable reasons – who wants to *save* that?) and if you must do either in public (which is somewhat rude in and of itself), do so into a disposable tissue and quickly throw it away.⁴⁶

Public Transportation - Trains

Japan's public transportation system is efficient and convenient, especially in and around large cities. Trains are one of the easiest, fastest, safest, and cheapest of methods of travel, and the rail system is very well developed and well run.

Each train is categorized by stops and speed. Local trains stop at each station on the line, express trains skip some stops and only stop at major stations, and super express trains (the bullet trains, called *shinkansen*) have their own tracks and lines and make only scheduled stops.

Tickets are usually sold at vending machines as well as over the counter. If the vending machines prove too difficult, English forms are sometimes available at counters. You can fill them out with all viable information and then present them to the person at the counter, and thus avoid having to describe your needs verbally (as the person behind the counter might not know English and you may have trouble articulating yourself in Japanese). Most of this information will be self-explanatory, but note that so called *green cars* or *green seats* are first class – they are larger and more expensive. Also, you have the option to reserve seats on some non-local trains, though this is usually not necessary.

Once purchased, tickets are inserted into a gate and returned to the traveler on the other side, as in many modern train systems throughout the world. Be careful that you've purchased a valid ticket and inserted it properly – invalid tickets cause the gates to close

⁴⁶ Erin O'Briant, "The Well-Rounded IE: When in China..." [IIE Solutions](#), July 2000: 22-25, 23.

and alarms to sound. It's unlikely that there would be any fuss over a gai-jin mishandling their ticket at the gate, but that doesn't make it a fun or worthwhile experience, either.

On the train platform, signs indicate which train is running on which track, and what the next incoming train's category and status are. The floor of the platform should have marks indicating where the doors of the train will be (train operators are trained to stop on a dime) and people will line up behind these marks. When your train arrives, wait for passengers to exit before boarding.

On the train, remember not to block the doors and to remove any backpacks or large, space-consuming packages of that sort and place them at your feet. Talking on cell phones in the train is forbidden in most cases, although browsing the web, sending text messages, or playing games is allowed (and heavily indulged in). Trains are very safe in Japan, and it is not unlikely to see people sleeping peacefully on the train, oblivious to their surroundings and free from any fear of theft or harassment. This doesn't necessarily mean you should be completely unaware while riding the train (especially if you're unsure of your stop), but it's a testament to the safety of the Japanese train system, and to Japan at large.⁴⁷

Public Transportation – Taxis

Taxis are a more expensive and sometimes less efficient method of transportation than trains and subways, but sometimes the demands of getting from point A to point B and the unavailability of trains (in more rural areas, for instance) demands their use.

Some things to keep in mind when using taxis:

- Rear doors – The rear doors of Japanese taxis have a mechanism to open and close them automatically which is controlled by the driver. It is best not to touch them at all; in fact, closing the doors (a habit for most of us) can actually break the sensitive device. The difficulties of working out a problem of this kind with an irate Japanese taxi driver are considerable, to

⁴⁷ [Japan-guide.com](http://www.japan-guide.com/e/e2016.html), < <http://www.japan-guide.com/e/e2016.html>>

say the least, and there is no “Calming down angry Japanese” section to these guides, so – do not do this.⁴⁸

- Tipping – Tipping taxi drivers (and most other providers of services in Japan) is not a custom in Japan, so don’t worry yourself over it. However, if you’ve already broken the first tip above, you may want to introduce the custom.⁴⁹
- Since train and bus services tend to drop off around midnight, demand for taxis at this time can be very large, especially on weekends. Be prepared for long lines and waits at train stations.

Meishi

Meishi are name cards, much like business cards in America, except they hold more importance. Giving and receiving name cards carries with it the respect and care required as if they were a part of the person themselves. When receiving a name card, accept it with both hands, take a moment to read it to yourself, and carefully store the card (preferably in a card holder, or at least somewhere where it won’t get bent or ruined). Do not write on name cards. When distributing name cards, present one to each person in turn, giving each person your attention while they accept the card.⁵⁰

Names

Japanese usually go by a surname, and do not refer to themselves by their given names unless with friends or family. If meeting a Japanese for the first time, use their surname, followed by the appropriate honorific (these are rather varied, but in most cases use the respectful “san” ending). Many Japanese invert their names when giving them to foreigners, so that they will tell you their given name first and their surname second. Be sure to find out which is which if there is doubt.⁵¹

⁴⁸ O’Briant, “The Well-Rounded IE,” 23.

⁴⁹ James Brooke, “Learning to Avoid a Deal-Killing Faux Pas in Japan,” The New York Times on the Web, 17 Sept. 2002, 2.

⁵⁰ O’Briant, “The Well-Rounded IE,” 24.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 23.

3.3.3 Restaurants & Eating

Travelers to Japan will definitely find themselves eating out frequently. There are a few things to keep in mind when attending restaurants that will make things run more smoothly.

Ordering can be a problem if you can't read Japanese or don't know what it is that you're able to read. Luckily, many restaurants have wax or plastic replicas of their popular dishes. These are said to be remarkably similar to what you will actually receive should you order them.

Watch for shoe conventions when you enter. If it's a traditional Japanese restaurant with low tables and sitting cushions rather than a Western style eatery, and especially if there are tatami, you may be required to remove your shoes in various areas. Check the other patrons for cues on what is most appropriate.⁵²

Although European utensils may be available, learn to eat with chopsticks anyway so as not to present a problem. Do not stick chopsticks into any food, especially rice (this is something done only at funerals in a special ceremony). Instead lay them on the bowl's rim. Do not pass food from your chopsticks to someone else. Do not wave your chopsticks around while deciding what to pick up. Do not use chopsticks to pull another bowl toward you. Make good use of your chopsticks – leaving food behind on your plate could be seen as wasteful.⁵³

When it comes time for the bill, it will be given to you upside-down (if it is given at all – depending on the restaurant, you may pay before ordering or through some other means) and you will usually take it to the cashier at the front to pay. Tipping, once again, is not a custom and is unnecessary.⁵⁴

⁵² [Japan-guide.com](http://www.japan-guide.com/e/e2005.html), < <http://www.japan-guide.com/e/e2005.html>>

⁵³ O'Briant, "The Well-Rounded IE," 25.

⁵⁴ Brooke, "Learning to Avoid a Deal-Killing Faux Pas," 2.

3.3.4 Household Etiquette

Gift Giving

Gift giving is a popular custom in Japan, but one that is subject to many sub-rules and customs. Never give knives or scissors as a gift, as it signifies the giver's desire to sever the relationship. Do not give gifts in groups of four or nine, which are associated with death and hardship, respectively. Gifts of socks or shoes are inappropriate. When wrapping gifts, do not use white or green wrapping paper.

Giving gifts on birthdays and Christmas (and other Western holidays) is not traditional, but is being adopted by some families in Japan.⁵⁵

Footwear

When entering a house in Japan, remove your shoes and change into a pair of house slippers (usually provided by the host). When entering an area of tatami floors, however, remove the house slippers; only walk on tatami in socks or barefoot. Before entering a bathroom, change out of the house slippers into bathroom-exclusive slippers. Remember to change out of the bathroom slippers and into the house slippers when you leave.⁵⁶

Meals

Refer to chopstick etiquette for rules on eating at the table.

Traditional Japanese homes will have low tables and cushions for sitting. The traditional Japanese sitting position is called *seiza*, and consists of a kneeling position, sitting on the calves and feet. This position can become very uncomfortable for those who are not used to it, and even some modern Japanese (who are used to using Western furniture) have trouble maintaining it. Generally, sitting in whatever way is most comfortable is acceptable.

⁵⁵ O'Briant, "The Well-Rounded IE," 23.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

Important guests are generally seated in the place of honor, the seat farthest from the door.

4 Methodology

While this project may not have involved a heavy amount of scientific experimentation, the verification and testing phase of the project (in which I attempted to verify, deny, or modify the research I had already conducted) still required a scientific approach. Even if the methods used cannot lead to a concrete answer, the guidelines of social research are still applicable and will improve the overall result.

4.1 Independent Verification

In order to test and verify the strategies created and researched in the previous section, I traveled to Japan to study. I spent one month at the Yamasa School for foreigners in Okazaki, Japan, from May 11, 2004 to June 12, 2004. During my stay I attempted to keep track of how culture shock was affecting me and which strategies were helping me to cope. I also tried to take note of whether or not the tips and etiquette tricks mentioned in the research were accurate or not.

4.2 Outside Verification

Despite the fact that I spent a month in Japan, I did not necessarily experience all of the possible symptoms of culture shock, nor all of the possible defenses listed in this document. I did not encounter every social situation in the etiquette guides. Therefore, I sought the experiences of others who had been in similar situations in Japan to see how they reacted. When attempting to acquire useful information about people from the opinions, thoughts and feelings of others, one is generally engaged in the science of Social Research.

4.2.1 Social Research and Survey Studies

When survey studies are conducted to try to draw conclusions about a group of people, they rely on *Empirical Generalizations* – inductive observations made about a given group of people or things which are assumed to hold for all cases or members of the group. That is to say, if a subset of a given group presents certain observations or facts,

then it can be concluded that the entire group shares the same behavior or condition. In order to verify that such connections exist and that such relationships are nontrivial, statistical analyses must be used to evaluate the observations.⁵⁷

If a scientific survey study is to be made, a certain minimum number of respondents (people submitting information to the survey takers) is needed in order to properly represent the population about which the researchers would like to draw conclusions. This number varies with the population, but researchers generally agree that at least 100 respondents are necessary to run statistical analyses. If statistical analyses are not possible, it is impossible to say with any degree of certainty that one's results are truly representative of the respondents, let alone the entire population.⁵⁸

I have not gathered together 100 respondents however, nor have I conducted a statistical analysis of the results. I have instead chosen to interview very few people by comparison. There are many reasons for this, both due to constraints and due to the advantages of following a different path. One reason behind this choice is that it would be very difficult to gather together 100 respondents from the target population of students who have studied abroad in Japan. Another reason is that I have chosen to interview respondents rather than have them submit survey questionnaires. Interviews take significantly longer per person, and with over 100 respondents it would've been far too great of a time constraint. But why the decision to interview?

4.2.2 Interview vs. Survey

There are many advantages and disadvantages to using the interview format over the survey format in Social Research, but for my purposes the interview format works best. Interviews are far more flexible than surveys, since questions can be altered, added, or removed on the fly by the interviewer. The interviewer is able to see the respondent react to the questions, and can derive information from nonverbal responses as well as the official answers. In addition, the environment in which the respondent answers the questions is controlled – outside factors such as setting and other people cannot affect the

⁵⁷ Kenneth D. Bailey, Methods of Social Research, (London: The Free Press, 1982), 43.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 100.

respondent if the environment is controlled properly. Lastly, an interview makes it easier to communicate complex questions and answers and insure that questions are answered completely.⁵⁹ Specifically, interviews allow “open” questions – questions whose answers do not fit into particular categories – whereas surveys generally require answers to be multiple choice or within a certain known range, so that they may be analyzed later on.⁶⁰

There are disadvantages of course. The presence of the interviewer makes bias, clerical error, and interviewer reactions play a role in the responses given. Bias and clerical errors can contribute to errors in recording on the part of the interviewer. The interviewer’s reactions to the respondent’s answers (or the respondent themselves) could also affect the way the respondent answers later questions. Interviews also make it more difficult to provide standardized questions with standardized answers, making it more difficult when dealing with larger groups.⁶¹

Given the nature of the questions and the difficulty in finding and evaluating large numbers of respondents, it is vastly preferable to interview a small number of knowledgeable people and to draw conclusions based on both my own and their experience. Therefore a traditional Survey sample with statistical analysis will not be the goal here, and the results of this paper will be subjective in nature. Instead an alternative methodology will be pursued:

Personal interviews or focus groups involve the face-to-face questioning of people selected for their particular knowledge, interests, or availability rather than at random. Although they allow for a more exploratory approach, the results cannot be generalized beyond the individuals or groups.⁶²

⁵⁹ Ibid., 182.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 123.

⁶¹ Ibid., 182.

⁶² Doyle, James K. “Alternative Social Science Methodologies.”

<<http://www.wpi.edu/Academics/Depts/IGSD/IQPHbook/ch10a.html#a>>, 14 Oct 2004.

With the personal interview method, as with all Social Research methods, it is important to note that error is inherent in the system. It assumes certain ideal conditions, namely an “equality of word and deed” and a language of “universally understood and context free terms” whereby actions and feelings are converted without loss of meaning into a language that all people can understand perfectly. Of course, in the real world it is difficult to equate actions and feelings with words and even more difficult to agree on just what those words mean to ourselves and others. This makes all Social Research a slightly inexact science.⁶³

The next pertinent question that social research can address is, how will these interviews be conducted, and what questions will yield the most useful results?

4.2.3 Effective Interviews

The core of the interview is of course the list of questions to be asked, called the *Interview Schedule*. Importance is placed not only on the questions themselves but the way in which they are presented and the instructions that accompany them.

There are many problems social researchers may encounter when they begin interviewing respondents, and many of these problems can be solved by altering or tailoring the questions.

For instance, many times a respondent will not answer a question truthfully, but will instead respond “normatively”, that is, the way he or she *thinks* he should answer. If there are any questions touching on potentially sensitive areas, they should be considered for removal unless they are important to the final conclusions being sought.

Respondents may also refuse to answer or answer dishonestly out of a fear of appearing stupid. It is important to emphasize before every interview that there are no right or wrong answers, and that (in almost all cases) the respondents will be completely anonymous once they have submitted their data.

⁶³ Bailey, Methods of Social Research, 185.

Lastly, respondents may claim that they cannot answer a given question because it is too general or because they have simply never thought of it before. It is important therefore to make each question specific and probing, such that even if a respondent hadn't thought of it before, they could easily choose an answer that applies to them.⁶⁴

If each question is not checked beforehand for relevance, there may be questions in the interview that don't make sense to the respondents and that aren't useful to the interviewers. It is important to insure that the following are all made clear:

- Relevance of the Study's Goals to the Respondents – if the respondents are not made aware of the study's overall goals, they may be unmotivated to answer the questions. If they are made aware they may be motivated to answer truthfully and fully.
- Relevance of the Questions to the Study – likewise, if the questions do not appear relevant to the overall goal of the study, respondents may not feel like their answering has anything to do with the study and may refuse to answer.
- Relevance of the Questions to the Respondents – interviewers must take care that all the questions in the interview are relevant to all the participants. That is, if respondents can be either male or female, questions on the interview should not assume that the respondent is one or the other. Separate interview schedules can be prepared for each type of respondent, or questions can be worded in such a way that they apply to all.⁶⁵

The wording of each question is important in other ways as well. Two types of questions, "double-barreled" questions and "leading" questions, should be avoided. Double-barreled questions are questions that essentially contain two questions but allow only one answer ("Are you over the age of 20 and are you married?" is one example of a double-barreled question). Respondents may not know how to respond if they satisfy one but not both halves of the question. Leading questions are questions phrased in such a

⁶⁴ Ibid., 112.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 113.

way that they suggest an answer (“You don’t smoke, do you?” is an example of a leading question). Questions should be kept as neutral as possible so as not to bias the respondents’ answers.⁶⁶

All of the above guidelines can help insure that an Interview Schedule is well written, understandable and likely to produce good results. Note that the schedule below, which I produced for my interview with Alice Valentine, isn’t as precise as a survey questionnaire would’ve been, since the interview format allows for a more flexible approach that isn’t constrained by the questions on the page at the beginning.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 121.

Interview Schedule Page 1

Interviewee: Alice Valentine

Interviewee Applicability

During approximately what periods of time were you in Japan?

What was the purpose of your stay each time?

How would you say that your job or study environment affected your exposure to the Japanese? (were you working directly with Japanese people? Were you encouraged to interact socially with them? Were there many other foreigners with you or were you alone?)

Culture Shock Symptoms

Culture shock has been described very generally as “anxiety resulting from losing one’s sense of ‘when to do what and how’.” Would say you suffered from this type of anxiety during your stays in Japan, and are there any specific ways that you wish to describe?

Did you find that at any point during your stay you were withdrawing from the new environment?

Did you spend large amounts of time reading, sleeping, or doing some other kind of activity that did not involve the outside environment?

Did you experience any of the following symptoms:

- Depression

Interview Schedule Page 2

- Nausea
- Sleep Disorders
- Unusual susceptibility to disease

When you first arrived in Japan, did you experience a period of idealistic enthusiasm for Japanese culture? Was this later followed by feelings of disillusionment with the culture?

Did you ever find yourself attempting to live your life as if you were still in your hometown, and resisting the changes that the new environment imposed upon you? How was this resolved?

Reverse Culture Shock

Did you find yourself bored, lethargic, or unable to start new projects upon your return to your home?

Notes:

5 Conclusions and Recommendations

The following section addresses changes, affirmations, and additions to section 3 that were suggested by direct experience in Japan and by interviews with Professor Alice Valentine.

5.1 Culture Shock

As expected, I felt the effects of culture shock during my stay in Japan. It's not something that students should try to avoid completely, as to do so would be to avoid growth altogether. It's only through exposure to the differences that one will have a fulfilling experience. Even after repeated visits, it's likely that each time one will arrive with expectations that might not even be conscious, and that these expectations will cause friction and culture shock all over again.

5.1.1 Symptoms

The most acute symptoms observed were a lack of confidence, inventiveness, and spontaneity. These traits are linked in many ways to one's knowledge of what is acceptable, what one may and may not do in a given environment, and, lacking that, creative solutions and spontaneous behaviors are curtailed by uncertainty. This is definitely an area where consistent effort may prevail, however – if one is brave enough to face the increased possibility of failure or of an uncomfortable situation, then risk taking could be rewarded with successful exchanges in the new environment. These might lead to new sources of confidence, and a better idea of what is and isn't acceptable, so that spontaneity and inventiveness can once again be given free reign.

Another noticeable symptom that was listed here was an increase in escapist activities like sleeping, reading, and solitary walks or bicycle rides. At first glance this would appear to be a textbook case of culture shock and something that must be stopped. In the case of excessive sleeping, this is probably true – it's either jet lag or a problem getting out into the world. This should be avoided. With the book reading or the solitary walking, however, they might simply be part of a person's natural rhythm. Reading books

in English when one is in an environment that is filled with a mostly unknown language and people can be reaffirming to oneself, a way of anchoring one's identity in the familiar. This may be necessary for some people, and as long as the books aren't being used to completely shut oneself off from the new environment, it might actually be healthy to return briefly to familiar ideas and language.⁶⁷

Another commonly observed and thoroughly expected behavior among eager young students is the "go native" response – an overly idealistic enthusiasm for all things Japanese, typically at the very beginning of the trip. Awe inevitably changes to disappointment at some time during the stay, as such high expectations usually can't be met (or imagined) for very long. In this case the longer the awe lasts, the greater the disappointment when it's broken. It doesn't necessarily happen only once, however. Peaks and valleys, similar to Rhinesmith's 10 Stages (see Section 3.1.2) in some respects, can be experienced.

The second maladaptive behavior, an attempt to live life as if one were in their home culture, is less full-blown but still evident in certain places. Occasionally a student may "put their foot down" and decide that they would like to or have to do something a certain way (the way they did it at home) and stubbornly adhere to that belief even if it flies in the face of the new culture. There are plenty of places for this to happen with two different cultures like America's and Japan's, and the American student needs to realize that no matter how correct they may be by *American* standards, the Japanese aren't going to see it "their way". In the end these little stands get crushed – an entire culture just won't change for one student protesting in the name of "the way we do it back home." They do stand out as powerful lessons in the rigors of culture shock, however.

Physical symptoms were not observed to any great extent – it is likely that these symptoms of culture shock are suffered in a small percentage of instances, where the shock is very acute. There was no noticeable increase in susceptibility to disease, although adjusting to the slightly different drinking water in Japan might cause mild stomach upset.

⁶⁷ Valentine, Alice. Interview By James Martineau, 13 Oct 2004.

5.1.2 Recognizing Culture Shock

By far the greatest help in recognizing that you are experiencing culture shock is a “Share Buddy”. A person with whom you can talk about your problems and share experiences is in the best position to recognize the symptoms you may not see due to defense mechanisms and to help you understand them yourself.

5.1.3 Dealing With Culture Shock

Forging new relationships on a wide variety of levels is very important to adjusting to the new culture and truly joining it, rather than continuing to be an outsider looking in. Depending on the program or circumstances of one’s stay, however, this can be very difficult. American students may find themselves at a school for foreigners, where they meet and study with many people from throughout the world, but not with Japanese students. It is important to check to see if one’s program or chosen school makes an effort to bring foreign students and Japanese students of a similar age together, or whether they leave it up to the foreign students. If left up to the students, it might prove extremely difficult to “break in” to the culture without activities or events to meet people at.

Regular exercise, journal keeping, and daily rituals do help to balance one’s feelings and keep oneself open and attentive to their own needs and feelings. Alone, however, they cannot provide all the comfort needed to conquer culture shock. An effort must be made to join, not just to observe.

5.1.4 Reverse Culture Shock

For students staying abroad for extended periods of time, reverse culture shock can be a very serious and very unexpected problem. As previously stated, no one sees reverse culture shock coming – it’s supposed to be a return to the familiar. Yet, inevitably it takes time to readjust to the changes in the home environment and the changes that one has undergone during the time spent abroad.

The most serious aspect of this process is the fact that friends and family will not provide the kind of attention and interest in the student's experience as the student feels they should. The rest of the student's world, his or her family and friends, have been continuing to live their lives during the student's long absence, and will undoubtedly find the student's stories and feelings interesting, but not nearly as interesting as they are to the student. There is an oft-reported feeling that the student's friends are urging him or her to move on and rejoin the activities they left behind, but many times the student must first deal with the changes he or she has undergone. This is another time when "Share Buddies" can be helpful – people who experienced it with you and who can feel the same enthusiasm for the time you spent there.

5.2 Customs, Etiquette and General Knowledge

These guides served me well in Japan, and were for the most part accurate. A few notes added here should help to clarify some of the tips.

Public Toilets

Eastern style toilets are significantly more difficult to operate than expected. Luckily, most of the facilities I used that had these toilets also had western style toilets next to them. Also, almost all public bathrooms appeared to be well-stocked with toilet paper and paper towels or a hand dryer.

If one wants to pick up free tissues in Japan, they should stick close to the busiest parts of Tokyo. I didn't see anyone passing out tissue paper outside of Tokyo, and then only in the heavily trafficked areas. If tissues are a priority for you, it's best to buy some and keep them with you, just in case.

Trains

The train system is very simple to use in Japan, even though it may be absolutely baffling at first. Even without Japanese experience, a foreigner could probably get themselves onto the proper train by asking for lots of help from the friendly attendants. It won't be an elegant or simple process, but they'll get you on the train.

Meishi

Meishi are generally only encountered in a business environment and students may go their whole stay without seeing one. Still, it's better to know the etiquette rules just in case.

5.3 Who Are the Japanese?

This section can be paraphrased down to one overriding feeling. While scholars have been declaring that the Japanese are mysterious, enigmatic and aloof for a long time now, the truth is that they are people, just like everyone else. While they may have a slight tendency toward certain characteristics in certain situations, in the end they are just as variegated as most other cultures. Each Japanese person is unique and individual just like you, and they may all respond differently to you. It's simply a matter of finding out. To all students traveling to Japan, leave your preconceptions about who the Japanese people are at the airport gate. Find out for yourselves.

5.4 Final Statements

Having researched, tested and revised these strategies for avoiding culture shock while abroad in Japan and making the experience one of growth and enjoyment, it is my opinion that they are a useful tool for students like myself who want to prepare themselves for the changes and differences that come along with studying in Japan.

The culture shock information presented here is a good way to gauge and evaluate one's progress, and to keep an eye out for symptoms which might otherwise go unnoticed. Constructive activities that promote healthy growth are provided to encourage students to do more than just tolerate the effects of culture shock. With these tools they can grow beyond it.

The information on the Japanese people is an interesting primer for those who are interested in what scholars, and the Japanese themselves, have thought of Japanese culture over the years. In many ways the very existence of such information is insight into the true culture of Japan.

The tips and etiquette guides are helpful lists of customs to keep in mind, lest one find oneself in such a situation. They are small faux-pas, but knowing them can greatly increase one's confidence in their new and exciting environment.

Overall these guides are not an all in one answer or a final solution. They are a starting point for the Japanese student and a spring board for their own discoveries. It is with hope that they might serve in this manner for others that I conclude my report.

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