

The Most Important Elements in Japanese Culture, Especially for Those Doing Business with Japan

By Kevin B. Bucknall

Japanese culture is not easy to understand for the Westerner examining it from the outside. It takes many years of study for a foreigner to get a grip on it, be able to understand what is going on, and at least in some cases see why something is happening. I have put together a list of the major components as I understand it but apologize in advance for things that I have missed or imperfectly understood. I am after all only a foreigner.

Self-Awareness, the Group, and Conformity

The Japanese are one of the most homogenous nations in the world Japan has been isolated by both geography and choice for many centuries so that relatively few foreigners live there. Marrying a foreigner has always been virtually taboo and, although it has started to become a bit more respectable, it is still not encouraged. Some 98.5 per cent of the residents of Japan are ethnic Japanese and the remainder are mostly Koreans, who often look Japanese to the casual eye. Koreans are one of only two sizeable minority groups resident in Japan, the other being Chinese.

Japan possesses a long and rich cultural history although many of the basic elements originated abroad, especially in China. Almost all Japanese are strongly aware and proud of their nationality. There is a deep fascination with the culture, history, and society and it would seem that for many, the proper study of mankind is Japan. The uniqueness is taken for granted and is a strong source of satisfaction. There is a major degree of self-absorption and a widespread interest in questions like “What does being Japanese mean?”, “Why has Japan been so economically successful?” and “What should be the role of Japan in the world?”

Despite the general homogeneity, there are some minor regional differences; in particular the Eastern areas facing the Pacific Ocean are seen as more outward looking when compared with the parts facing the Sea of Japan. Another important difference exists between Kansai (the old traditional area that includes Kyoto and Osaka) and Kanto, the Tokyo area, which represents modern Japan - accents, art, and cooking styles all differ.

The Consciousness of Being Japanese is Part of a Strong Nationalism

These deep feelings of nationalism are tapped by Japanese firms which for years successfully sold the idea that imports are generally inferior, are not suited to local habits or lifestyles, or might even be dangerous to health. For instance, many Japanese believe that they cannot eat imported rice without suffering indigestion. Similarly, consumers often used to prefer to buy Japanese products, even if they were more expensive. This was one of several reasons why foreign firms found it difficult to penetrate the Japanese market.

The recession that began in 1991 brought unemployment and as belts tightened people began to seek cheaper products even if they were imported. This has allowed foreign firms more access and American cash-and-carry stores have opened. Foreign beef is now actually sought, especially since the arrival of BSE in Japan in 2001. Old habits die hard but the old “buy the best at any price” attitudes have begun to wane. This can be seen in magazines aimed at consumers . once they focused on the best; now they run articles on where to buy cheaply.

The Desire to Conform is Strongly Built into the National Psyche

It is widely held that it is dangerous for an individual to distance himself or herself from the group: one should do what the others are doing and not buck the trend. There is a well-known folk-saying

that it is the nail that stands up that always gets hammered down. You might remember that it is a mistake to try to get a Japanese to act in a way that would make him or her stand out from the crowd. They will often not be able to comply, and if they try to do so, they will feel awkward and resent you for it.

Table 1.1 The strong urge to conform can be seen in things such as:

The uniform-like sameness of clothing that is essential in the business world
The identical apparel necessary in virtually all sports or leisure activities
The sudden sweeping crazes for a single leisure activity
The standardized lunch boxes and back packs which schoolchildren carry
The identical raincoats worn by children and young students

Harmony in Group Relations is Heavily Prized

People go to great lengths to avoid any action that would disrupt the harmony of the group (*wa*). The effort to keep harmony increases the level of hidden stress and there are usually strong undercurrents and rumours circulating behind the scenes. Perhaps to help defuse the stress of having to constantly behave correctly, Japanese adult males often enjoy reading thick *manga* comics, some of which feature a hero totally unconstrained by any social mores and contain sex, sadism and violence. You might notice men openly reading them on trains or subways; there is no stigma attached to this. Some Japanese television programs also involve extreme violence or are grossly humiliating to the individual concerned, and probably serve a similar function of cathartic release.

Group harmony is everywhere and can be broken in unusual ways, for example, when on a train some Japanese prefer not to have a foreigner join their coach as they feel that it upsets the peaceful harmony of the existing group. There is a vague fear, although not articulated, that foreigners could do something unexpected and this worries people. They will, however, still be polite to you.

There is No Strong Class System in Japan

Japan moved so rapidly from a feudal society with a strong rural basis to a modern urban industrial society that it avoided the build up of a large working class with an awareness of its identity and bound by feelings of antagonism towards the ruling classes in theoretical Marxist fashion. Consequently, there are few feelings of the “us and them” kind. Despite this, the descendants of the samurai class and old rich families are definitely better placed to get their children into the top educational establishments and from there into positions of authority. It is hierarchy without modern class warfare.

Young Japanese Sent Abroad to Study

Quite often young Japanese are sent to English-speaking countries like America or England to study. In Japan they are subject to rigid expectations about their behaviour and need to conform; in contrast, while abroad they may engage in extreme forms of dress or dye their hair blond etc. This is

particularly likely if a small group bands together. Each person knows that this is their main chance to be different and express rebellious attitudes. If you have encountered punk or otherwise extreme individuals in your country, be aware that this may not be the norm when they return to Japan. Should you come across one later, working in Japan and dressed very formally, it would be extremely unwise to mention the brief period of rebellion, especially in front of other Japanese.

This said, some youngsters in large Japanese cities are starting to dress and behave in ways considered both extreme and offensive by their elders. In major cities you can expect to see youth with coloured hair or curly hair, and wearing lurid clothing, often mixed in somewhat surprising ways. A generation gap has appeared and is gradually widening (see below).

Social Changes

Outside Influences are Strong

The Japanese people usually regard their culture as unique, but it is surprisingly eclectic and open to outside influences. The written language came from China and the Buddhist religion from Korea. The Japanese language itself is full of English words which are generally liked and used widely. This contrasts strongly with France, where borrowing foreign words is officially frowned upon and resisted by the state. In Japan, foreign sports and fashions are avidly seized upon and modern technology has been quickly accepted, often improved, and then disseminated widely. If this issue arises in conversation, it would be a good idea for you to praise the flexible way they have used and often improved upon the import.

The Second World War is a Touchy Subject

In Japan, this is called “The Pacific War”. The dropping of the atom bomb, as well as the ultimate defeat, had a major impact on people. The culture has a strong central core which sees things as either being right and proper or else totally wrong; to lose is improper and hence is unacceptable. In addition the Japanese perceive themselves as being generally superior: for an individual to lose at anything is regarded as a disgrace but to lose to a foreigner is an even greater blow to self-esteem. The occupation by the United States immediately after the war was traumatic and struck a severe blow to the accepted image of themselves. It not only underlined the failure, it also brought in by force various Western (mainly North American) liberal institutions and a new Constitution which many resented.

As can be imagined, the behaviour of some of the foreign troops was alien and often offensive. As a result, some older Japanese have something of a love-hate relationship with the United States. Note that should the Pacific War or post war period be raised with you (you should never do so), it is customary to refer to the occupying powers as “The American visitors”, and you should avoid the words “Occupation” and “Occupiers” as they would not endear you.

The Generation Gap

A generation gap has begun to open up as younger Japanese start to go their own way, although there is still widespread veneration of the elderly. The older generation is often aware of Japanese atrocities committed in China and South East Asia but ignore and try to repress the memory. In contrast, most of the youth have been deliberately kept in ignorance by the centralized and conformist educational system, which glosses over any reprehensible behaviour and presents Japan as a simple victim of the war. The youth are told repeatedly about the atom bombing of Japan, which is well publicized in an annual commemoration of the bombing of Hiroshima on August 6th 1945. The refusal to depict Japan as anything other than a victim in World War Two began to fray at the edges in the 1990s but still persists.

What are the Youngsters Coming to?

A popular topic of conversation among Japanese adults is the behaviour of young people, particularly their questioning of traditional values such as group loyalty and conformity. A small but increasing number of younger Japanese are beginning to act independently and eschew the group. It is possible to meet single Japanese males cycling around countries like Australia, rather than going abroad in groups on organized tours. Even the identification of self with work has weakened a little and a few males are spending more time at home with the wife and children, and will even take more of their holiday entitlement to do this.

Many older people worry about such changes in youth and the challenge to traditional values. Some of the elderly condemn the new generation in bitter terms, believing that they are rejecting an essential part of what is seen as "Being Japanese". It disturbs them, for example, that the young no longer bow formally on the street when encountering someone they know, and they worry that selfish individualism seems to be on the increase. This is frequently felt to be a disease imported from the West.

The increasing numbers of Japanese studying abroad may eventually speed up the pace of change, including the adoption of new ideas and a more creative approach in business, but so far the young tend to be frustrated by the system and are often eventually forced back into more traditional modes of behaviour if they wish to advance their careers.

One significant feature is that a small number of intelligent, well-educated youngsters are no longer following the traditional path of joining a top company and working their way up. Instead, they are choosing to set up their own businesses, particularly in the arts and creative areas. Such people are often the more successful youngsters or at least those who are trying hard. Behind them are unknown numbers of disenchanted youth, unemployed and living off their parents or moving from low-paid job to job. They appear to live to party. With an emphasis on way-out clothing, music and, until magic mushrooms were recently made illegal, psychedelic drug trips, it is very reminiscent of Swinging London in the 1960s or Haight-Ashbury around 1967. It is too soon to know if this trend of disenchanted youth will continue or merely be another short-lived fad.

Art and Culture

Symbolism Matters Much

Symbolism goes back a long way and people are constantly on the lookout for it. They will examine the actual words used in conversations and any gestures that may accompany the chosen phrase. It is not only what is said and done that is considered, for people watch for things that are not being done or said and ask themselves why.

It is useful to remember a few of the symbols in Table 1.2 (below) because you will come across them and can then make an appropriate comment. Symbolism is often a good topic of conversation if you are stuck. A comment by you about the painting on the wall of the meeting room, for example, might allow you to gain credibility and assist you in your negotiations. It shows that you have done your homework well, without you having to say anything that could be considered boastful or arrogant. More than that, it demonstrates an interest in Japan which most Japanese find hard to resist.

In the West, an awareness of seasons and their changes, once so much a part of rural and peasant life that it was taken for granted, has largely disappeared. By contrast, in Japan there is still a strong identification with the periodic flow through the year. Each season brings its own relevant symbol, often drawn from agriculture. For example, such things as the first plum, the first tea, and the first rice are important to many people. They will take pride in buying them and serving them to family and friends, who will be expected to recognize the event as a sort of minor milestone marking the passing of time. As part of a seasonal awareness, most Japanese do not normally swim after August and it might be better if you did not suggest going for a dip after that.

Nature is Beautiful - but Only When Tamed

Beauty and nature have a strong place in Japanese traditional culture. As a component of their view of life and the world, the Japanese feel a sort of “ongoingness” in both nature and life, of which they are a part. The Shinto religion with its stress on nature as central and the relatively unimportance of humans when set in the natural landscape is influential here. However, nature in the raw is considered to be only the crude essence and it is essentially too inelegant; man is also a part of nature and should mould it to an even greater perfection.

Table 1.2 Some standard symbolism in the arts

Pine tree	Long life
Bamboo	Constancy and virtue
Fern	Expanding good fortune
Lobster	Old age
Carp fish	Strength and determination (good for boys)
Peach blossom	Happiness in marriage and the feminine virtues of softness, mildness and peacefulness (good for girls)
Sweet potato	Struggle of the poor to survive
Pine needles	Marital fidelity
Mandarin ducks	Marital fidelity

This strong feeling for nature, accompanied by a need to shape it, can be seen in the composition of Japanese paintings; in the way flowers are arranged; or the design and placement of rocks, lakes and temples in parks and gardens. This “take and improve” approach is also evident in the treatment of imported technology.

The Memory Can Beat the Actual Event

An important part of culture and art was the recollection of a scene or event. This might have been regarded as inspiring at the time, but the memory of the event would often be seen as even more important and make up something truly beautiful. In the past, the recollection could be assisted by the person writing a poem to commemorate and record the main milestones in his or her life. These might include such things as visits to another place, family gatherings, marriages, or the arrival of the first born child.

A poem might also be composed as a result of feelings created by something beautiful in nature, such as falling autumn leaves or seeing a mountain spring at dawn. When read years later, the true spiritual beauty of the event is reinforced and solidified, developing a new and deeper meaning.

The widespread taking of photographs by Japanese travelling abroad seems to be the contemporary version of writing a poem and may serve a similar need.

Work and Hierarchy

Only The Best Is Good Enough

Do note that the Japanese strive for total professionalism in whatever they do. Any task is taken seriously, and is normally done with careful dedication. Employees at all levels are expected to seek perfection and most try to do so. This is true even of low grade workers, who often wear a simple uniform, such as a headband, to show they are a dedicated, hardworking and supportive member of the group. The general attitude is that there is only one way of doing a job properly and it will be followed. Zen Buddhism encourages this view, seeing the world in terms of either right or wrong. A

person should not be wishy-washy and fudge things, but do things properly. If as a foreigner you do something the right way they might see it - but if you do it the wrong way you can guarantee that they will notice at once.

The high quality achieved in products such as motorcars, cameras, and TV sets is a manifestation of this dedicated approach. Taking extreme care with details shows in Japanese flower arranging, Japanese gardens, the pretty way that food is arranged on plates, and the sudden group crazes for an introduced Western sport or commodity but which require particular dress or way of using it. The famous Japanese tea ceremony is an example, where the room itself, the simple decoration, the utensils used and even the movements made are precisely defined and must be followed. In Japan, training and education are highly valued, as befits the quest for professionalism and perfection. Training and retraining of workers is a constant feature of many Japanese firms.

Hard Work is Regarded as Normal

Companies expect their workers to voluntarily give up their evenings or part of the weekend to work or engage in work-related social activities. Hardly any staff members seem to take all of their allotted annual holidays. Lunch times are commonly restricted to half-an-hour and few people will drink alcohol in the middle of the day as it might impair performance. Excluding Australia and New Zealand, in 2003, the Japanese worked longer hours than any other developed nation. Attitudes are weakening over time, for in 1979 the average employed person worked 2,126 hours a year (USA 1,833) but only 1,801 hours in 2003 (USA 1,792) A preference for more leisure time has appeared and Japan is starting to resemble other developed countries. However, differences in recording methods probably underestimate the hours actually worked in Japan which in turn overestimates the convergence.

Gender Roles

Like Thursday's Child, Women's Lib. Still has far to go

Japan is not a country where Women's Lib. has made much inroad. Although the Constitution guarantees equality, this does not in fact exist. Japanese males do not regard women as equals and most would subscribe to the view that "A woman's place is in the home". Note that few Japanese males would be interested in hearing about the feminist movement in your country! In Japanese companies, most women are young and engaged in mundane low-level jobs like typing and filing. A demure attitude is demanded of women, and their eyes are generally kept downcast in the presence of men. Few women will voice an opinion even in the unlikely event of being asked.

The Office Ladies or "Fragrant Flowers"

Young Japanese women in white-collar work are generally known as "Office Ladies" and referred to as "OLs". Their main function is to be young, decorative, well dressed, and fragrant, in order to brighten up the men's workday. In the evening they are expected to engage in mindless and frivolous entertainment. While at work they are only entrusted with minor tasks like making tea for the men and doing the photocopying. They are often expected to get in early to do mundane chores like dusting and cleaning. It is assumed that women will marry and leave work by their mid-twenties, after which they are disparagingly referred to as "Christmas cakes" (She's no good after the 25th!) In many companies a woman must resign if she marries.

It is difficult for the intelligent and earnest-minded professional woman to be taken seriously; many of them have to serve a lengthy period of time undertaking mindless repetitive tasks before they can start to rise in their career path. In the business world, male networks are extensive and bonding activities are commonplace, normally being held after work hours or at the weekend. They include attending various sporting activities and going out for an evening's eating and drinking. Women have no place here: this is a hidden but powerful brake on their advancement.

The role of men

Men are expected to be married by 35 years of age, i.e., about ten years older than for women. The function of the male is to earn sufficient money to take care of his family, which involves working hard, spending long hours at the company, and gaining promotion. There is little feeling that he should be at home, share in family life, help raise the children, or even love his wife, although he is expected to sire children. Once that has been achieved, he is largely perceived as a mere breadwinner and status-earner for the family. In general, the Japanese males are not really comfortable with modern Western views about the position and progress of women, nor the career-mindedness of modern Western women. To many it seems both alien and threatening.

The Power of the Wife

In Japan, the power of women is still largely restricted to the home, where they play a major role. They are expected to bear children, and are then responsible for bringing them up, virtually alone. They tend to spoil their children, especially the boys, and make the decisions about their education (although the husband would be consulted). A common term for a wife is *okusan*, which exactly translates as “Her Indoors”, the same term used by Arthur Daley in the British TV show *Minder*. One of her steady tasks is to do the shopping, as most Japanese prefer fresh food bought daily and the tiny urban apartments allow little space for food storage in any case. Some change in these views is occurring in the new millennium and corner stores are beginning to reduce in number.

The wife maintains a tight control over the purse strings: the husband hands over his monthly salary and the wife then gives her husband his daily spending money. This is often presented as indicating that she has real power in the family, but to my mind it really reflects weakness: the husband is never there and so is not able to make decisions about household expenditures. When the wife takes over this responsibility, it allows him to spend even more time away from home, drinking with colleagues and friends and carousing in bars and restaurants. Wifely control over the finances does actually prevent him from spending all his salary outside the house which would result in the family suffering. There is growing dissatisfaction among young women about their status and role, but only a little real change. A few highly competent women have succeeded in politics and business, but they have to be a lot better than the men at their level to do so.

The Attitude Towards Women is Definitely Changing – a Bit

Such attitudes towards women are still the most common, although there has been some relaxation and changes since the 1980s. A shortage of skilled labour is slowly eroding the traditional view that women have to resign on marriage and especially if they have a child, and a small, but growing, number of women are developing a career path. Younger Japanese in particular are changing their attitudes and becoming less “Japanese” in their views about the proper roles of husband and wife but they can still find it difficult to alter things. Over half of Japanese women are in the work force, but in the main they still occupy the lower positions.

The recent recession meant less overtime at work and more time for some husbands to get home early enough to see their children before bed and participate at least a little in household chores. Older married men are still not generally expected to help around the house, cook, clean or shop. With younger couples, husbands are starting to do a bit along these lines, particularly if no outsider can actually see them doing it. The Japanese are not in agreement on whether this is a real and permanent change. Some observers express doubt that the young husbands will persist in helping around the house: they think that when the recession ends the men folk will revert to type and stay late at work or go out drinking with their colleagues. Others feel that it is more likely that they will revert to type after a few years as they grow older in any case. Few married men will take their wives out in the evening for pleasure, and those who do are virtually all young.

A surprising change occurred back in 1993, when it suddenly became the fashion for young unmarried women to dress in wild brief costumes that possessed more than overtones of bondage and S & M, and to attend rave clubs after work. This contrasts sharply with traditional demands on women and their demure and silent behaviour while at work. It seems to be part of a changing and increasingly

rebellious attitude on the part of young women. Many of whom cannot yet reach far into the professional job area and are striking out in other directions instead.

Yet their apparent rebellion still may involve spending heavily on fashionable and stylish clothing to attract the attention of the males. Some deny this and feel that by 2005, the increasing numbers of young women who dress in ways that look outlandish often do so to compete with each other and to be ultra-fashionable rather than to attract males. Indeed, many males may be put-off by the chosen rather extreme gear.

By 2000, with the economy still sluggish and unemployment rising, it became fashionable to wear cheaper clothing, for example from Uniqlo a highly successful chain of stores, although an item from there might often be worn along with an expensive top brand item perhaps from Armani. Such “mix and match” is common.

It is difficult to see any sudden change in the general male attitude towards women. It would involve sweeping alterations in the way business is conducted. For example, it would be difficult for a Japanese husband to spend more time with his family and engage in housework. In order to do this, he would have to adjust his attitude towards the firm, and to the person above him, as well as modify his feelings of loyalty to the work group. He might have to leave work before the boss, which is currently hard to imagine, or refuse to go out for a drink with colleagues, also difficult to conceive. This suggests that small adjustments, nibbling away at the edges, are more probable than a rapid and major change, for that would take a revolution in attitudes as well as behaviour.

Laws and Regulations

Over-Regulation Abounds

Detailed laws and regulations are widespread in Japan which is a surprisingly bureaucratic society. This is accepted as normal to an extent that would probably be resisted in more individual cultures. Privacy and keeping secrets from the group are not important concepts and the idea that individuals may sometimes need protecting from their rulers is alien. All living in Japan have to fill in detailed forms for the local police station, which keeps the records.

In order to do business, you will often find that there are awkward reporting requirements that have to be met. This is part of the belief that much knowledge should be in the hands of the state and it is not designed merely as a form of protection against foreigners, although it may work to that effect. There is nothing you can do but learn to live with it.

Oddly, the Law Itself is Not That Important

Despite the regulations, the law in an abstract sense is not taken particularly seriously. Rules are followed because group harmony (*wa*) demands this.

Contracts are often ignored, or at least the words used in them are not taken seriously. This attitude towards contracts is slowly eroding as Western ideas are examined and some felt to be useful, but the general attitude persists. Many things are written into contracts because some foreigner insists on it, rather than because the Japanese company thinks it is necessary, or even a particularly good idea.

Government Departments “Suggest” and People Jump

Government departments are most powerful and a quiet suggestion from one almost has the impact that a law would have in Western society. A firm ignores such official advice at its peril. The state controls companies in indirect fashion, using the approach of administrative guidance. If you are operating a company in Japan, this is worth noting. By the mid 1990s, some minor relaxation of the seriousness with which official hints are taken had begun to appear, but most companies still comply immediately. The most powerful of the departments is the Ministry of Finance which does everything from drawing up the national budget, to raising taxes and supervising the financial sector of Japan. Many agree that its power is too great but, despite efforts, it is proving hard to trim back.

Orders are Followed

Japanese tend to obey instructions without hesitation. They do not feel it clever or smart to get away with rule breaking, unlike say in the UK, USA or Australia where this might easily occur if it made sense to do so. In Japan, such behaviour is more likely to horrify than be regarded as sensible or amusing. If you skirt the law or find an ingenious way of getting around some regulation, it would be unwise to mention this to anyone and you should never boast about it.

Other Cultural Features

The Race Issue And Hierarchical Ranking

The Japanese view many aspects of their own society in a hierarchical way. One area where this shows is race and there is a strong concern with racial purity in Japan. There is a powerful feeling that Koreans, *Burakumin* (see below) and Chinese are inferior people. The Japanese attitudes towards them are similar to those of traditional high caste Hindus towards the Untouchables in India. Over 600,000 Koreans live in Japan, having been forced or volunteered to come when Korea was a colony of Japan (1910-45), but they are usually regarded with contempt. A lot of Koreans actually look Japanese and are able to pass, but they are forced to carry ID papers at all times and are discriminated against in a variety of other ways, such as not being allowed to vote or work for the government. Even in Hiroshima, destroyed by an atom bomb in World War Two, the many dead Korean conscripts are not allowed a memorial in the Peace Memorial Park.

When a couple wish to marry, both families are likely to hire private detective agencies to investigate the background of the prospective partner. If a report is negative, it is most common for the couple to cancel their plans. In part it is a fear of contaminating Japanese blood and losing the racial purity but even in the case where the partner is one hundred per cent Japanese, there can be much anxiety about the other family's genetic heritage, particularly any mental or physical illness. The general attitude is reminiscent of bloodstock horse breeders in the West.

The *Burakumin* are untouchables who are still regarded with some feeling of horror and are the descendants of ordinary Japanese who were unfortunate enough to work in certain unclean occupations, largely concerned with dead animals. They included both those killing animals and those who used animal skins in some way, such as shoe makers. *Burakumin* are discriminated against in a variety of ways, including employment prospects and marriage partners, but few Japanese are willing to discuss the issue. Remember not to ask questions!

The concern with "Japanese-ness" is deep: Japanese who come from the island of Okinawa are held in some contempt for not really being true Japanese. This misgiving extends to the Nisei, those ethnic Japanese who are born and raised abroad. They are not really accepted, trusted, or even liked much, despite possessing racial purity. Somehow they are felt to lack some magic ingredient and are not "proper". A Japanese sumo wrestler born in Hawaii does not really capture the hearts of the masses, as he is not seen as truly Japanese. The same feeling can apply to a Japanese person sent abroad to work for the company: on their return some have found that they are not always fully accepted. Their friends tend to fear that the returned expatriate has lost something intrinsically Japanese or may have picked up some foreign characteristics which have in some way contaminated him or her. They are now too different to be fully-fledged members of the group and will probably remain something of an outsider.

Foreign Countries are Ranked - and Some are Rank

There is a clear if loosely graded hierarchy in the Japanese attitude towards foreign countries. In this hierarchy, other Asians are often disliked or looked down on, and this easily shades into hatred in the case of Koreans. The Chinese are respected for having provided the source of much of Japanese culture, but are rather despised for not having responded better to the European invasions of the Nineteenth Century, unlike Japan which immediately buckled down and set to work to catch up, and triumphed. Europeans are respected (Japan borrowed widely from them in the last century, especially

from Germany) as are North Americans. The rest of the world is seen as inferior to these two groups of peoples.

It is a difficult area to discuss, but on a racial basis, there is a widespread feeling that Negroes are mentally backward and somewhat inferior as human beings. Prime Minister Nakasone probably felt he was commiserating with a friend when he said the intellectual level in the United States was lower than that in Japan because of the presence of Blacks and Hispanics. He was, it seems, disturbed by the criticisms made abroad of his views, and many Japanese did not find it easy to understand what the fuss was all about. It must be admitted that many Japanese are racially prejudiced and just about all are strongly nationalistic, and feel thankful that they are Japanese and not anything else. Interestingly, Japan does not allow dual nationality for any adult: one either is, or is not, a member of the nation.

Appearances are Very Deceptive

There is a striking difference between appearance and reality in Japan. This is inevitable in a society which places great emphasis on appearance, presentation, politeness and style, while attempting to maintain many feudal attitudes in a modern and democratic world. These old-fashioned attitudes involve strong feelings of social ranking, and include automatic obedience and loyalty to those above. These ingrained views tend to clash with more modern and Western views of equality, as well as traditional ones of group solidarity and at least some participation in decision-making. In order to reconcile possible contradictions and avoid embarrassment, everyone understands that a surface appearance must be maintained, while a different reality proceeds underneath. The words *tatemae* ((tah-tay-ma-eh), meaning “face” or the image projected to the public, and *honne* (hone-nay), meaning “real intention”, are used to describe this. This split allows the complex system to work and is flexible enough to deal with rapid change.

The dichotomy between appearance and reality shows in many areas. The real holders of power are often invisible, even at the highest levels of the nation. In most major companies meetings of staff are constantly held to discuss issues and reach a decision . but everyone present waits for the leader to indicate the preferred view, which they then adopt. As a different example, things may be said which are known to be untrue, but uttering the falsehood prevents someone else from losing face. Related to this, the word “yes” can easily mean “no”, “maybe”, or even nothing at all. When dealing with Japanese, it is easy to see the appearance but it takes time and skill to delve through to the reality underneath. Experience and sensitivity are required.

In similar vein, style, good taste and appearance are most important, often mattering more than substance. It all means that in Japan you can never accept things at their face value and you should try to think carefully about what might be the hidden meaning that lies behind the words you hear. What you are told and what you think you see may not be what you finally get.

Education is Confucian - with its Attendant Problems

The Confucian approach to education involves much rote learning, discipline, and emphasis on conformity. It often discourages questioning and creative thinking. This is a problem for any modern economy and the Japanese are well aware that they could do better here; there is just no agreement on how. Education is seen as serving a social purpose, such as building a national identity, and molding the young into a desired type of adult, and not as a way of helping individuals to develop their full potential. As a consequence, rigid central control exists, even down to the level of the detailed content of the textbooks used in all schools.

There is a fiercely competitive struggle among children to succeed and climb the educational ladder to the finest universities; these are widely recognized and Tokyo University is seen as being at the top. All the institutions at each rung of the ladder are ranked, including high schools, junior schools and even kindergartens. For a Japanese family, it is important to get one's children into a kindergarten that has a good record for successfully promoting its young charges into excellent schools and ultimately to the elite universities. The child is under pressure all the way through, from teachers, peer group and parents, especially the mother. To Western eyes, Japanese children often seem to be

deprived of childhood. Many suffer, and some cannot stand it and crack up; too many commit suicide under the strain.

Once at university there is an abrupt change: for most students the pressure is totally removed. It is difficult to fail, and many students tend to drift through doing little or no work, as if they were taking a holiday after the rigorous years of hard dedicated work to get where they are. For many this is a time of developing social skills and contacts. After graduation, the former students buckle down and start to work hard again.

A degree from a well-regarded university, at least until very recently, meant a guaranteed job for life, in either a large company or the public service. The recession in the 1990s weakened the likelihood of this, but parental perception has not changed; the strong pressure to force their child to climb the ladder continues.

Japan is a Very Safe Country

By Western standards there is little crime. Street crime is particularly rare and it is generally safe to walk around all city areas, even the most sleazy, without fear. You might be seriously overcharged in a local bar but are unlikely to be physically mugged or robbed. The Japanese themselves tend to worry about rising crime levels, although there has actually been a fall in many crimes over the last few decades, in contrast with most other modern industrialized countries. Drugs are not a particular problem and until now the only real substance-abuse concerns glue-sniffing among a small minority of youngsters. The offenders are often unskilled and ill-educated, and already see themselves as having failed in life - in a land where every child is dedicated to succeeding and getting into the best university possible.

The reason for the generally high level of safety is not the attitude to law, which as an abstract concept is not particularly respected, but a mixture of things like a strong social pressure to conform, a desire not to lose face, and a wish not to bring shame upon parents and family. Another and more formal crime deterrent is the conspicuous presence of neighbourhood policemen who are very familiar with the area and its residents. Local police stations are widely scattered throughout urban areas.

A robust sense of local community is also a deterrent against crime. Neighbourhood Associations are common and function effectively as a group binding agent. Strangers stand out and people tend to keep an eye on them. The neighbourhood organization may also maintain a system of a sort of civilian "Duty Officer", to whom people can report any problems. In addition, there is a widespread urban public-address system, with loud speakers mounted on poles, which issue frequent announcements from a local municipal office; this helps to build a sense of community and also strengthens local control. In general, the older areas enjoy a greater sense of community than the multi-storey blocks of flats and the sprawling commuter belts.

Shame on you!

Shame is taken far more seriously in Japan than in the West. As an example of the seriousness with which shame is regarded, the parents of some Japanese Red Army terrorists actually committed suicide. As another example, in Japan, a manager may choose to punish an underling merely by staring hard at him or her. This actually works and the person would feel humbled and ashamed. Finally, the behaviour of Kamikaze pilots in the Second World War, when they were prepared to face certain death to help the common cause, never fails to amaze Western observers. The horror of the shame involved if they failed to hit the target, even when it meant dying as a result, lurked underneath the more positive feelings of obeying the dictates of group loyalty and sense of face.

During negotiations, you might find the Japanese side tries to shame you into making concessions as it works for them and they may think it will work on you.

For Working Spaces, Small is Beautiful

Land is expensive and observing senior executives sharing an office is quite common. However, they will usually only share with someone of the same status; the all-pervasive hierarchical view of society prevents those above dealing equally with those below. It is common to see several vice-presidents

in one tiny area, whereas in the West, each would probably insist on having his or her own rather splendid office. This sharing of working space has the benefit that people know what their colleagues are doing and information passes quickly and easily between people. The notably high noise level that results does not seem to cause a problem for most Japanese, who have perhaps got used to it in the small, cramped dwellings in which many live, and their unusually heavy involvement in watching TV and listening to the radio.

Homosexuality is Not Discussed

Homosexuality has been tolerated in Japan, but it was never considered a fit topic for discussion and until recently was kept underground. A change is under way and back in the summer of 1994 the first-ever gay parade by lesbians and gays was held in Tokyo. AIDS is still not something that is openly discussed and it is often presented as solely a disease of foreigners. It is known that hospitals frequently do not inform sufferers with HIV that they are infected but because condoms are widely used in Japan (contraceptive pills are banned), AIDS has not spread quickly. You are unlikely to face a discussion about AIDS, but if it arises, you should not be surprised if foreigners are blamed for the whole thing! You might feel that polite sympathy is in order.

Public “bad manners” can contrast sharply with private politeness

For some reason, certain acts are more tolerated in public than in private which strikes some Westerners as very strange. For example, if you live in Japan for any period of time, it would be unusual not to have seen some man urinating or vomiting in a public place. This would be regarded as disgusting in most Western countries, but such behaviour is regarded as reasonable in Japan, as long as it done is in a public place and not, for example, in someone else’s garden.

Drunks Occupy a Special Place in the Culture

Many Japanese seem to regard them tolerantly or with some amusement, even when they are rowdy. A sort of “stage drunk” appears in quite a few Japanese movies and despite the character being unreliable, untrustworthy, or possibly a thief, he is normally presented in a humorous and understanding manner.

It is acceptable, probably desirable and really inevitable that you become drunk while doing business in Japan. When you are invited into a Japanese group and they are drinking heavily, you are expected to do the same. Under such circumstances, not to join in enthusiastically would be to let the side down and do your reputation considerable harm. Some of the drunks you will see in the street are highly respectable businessmen on their way home after a social business session with the boys. They are not the lager louts of some Western societies or skid-row residents with a bottle in a paper bag staggering along looking for a doorway to sleep in.

The Name of the Emperor

You might sometimes encounter a blank look if you refer to the current or any earlier Emperor by his name. This is because when a Japanese Emperor ascends the throne, he always chooses a name for his ruling era, and the counting of his reign starts with “Year 1” of that era. An occasional pause before you get a reply is because Japanese think of and refer to the name of the era rather than the Emperor as a person. When an emperor dies, he loses his own name and henceforth is referred to by the name of the era. The deceased Emperor Hirohito is now known as the “Showa Tenno”, and not as Emperor Hirohito, because he is the Tenno of the Showa era. He was of course older than the name of the era which now refers to him.

People are Generally Optimistic and Look on the Bright Side

Perhaps because of the influence of Buddhism which emphasizes impermanence and the normality of suffering, most Japanese people tend to expect progress and improvements. After a bad event, such as a building being destroyed, many will tend to say that the new one will be better and more enjoyable than the old. There is a fatalism about the culture but it is not pessimism. This shows in

successive official pronouncements about the long-running recession that began in 1991 – there were a lot of announcement about it ending before the economy really began to pick up!

White Gloves are a Form of Polite Dress in Some Occupations

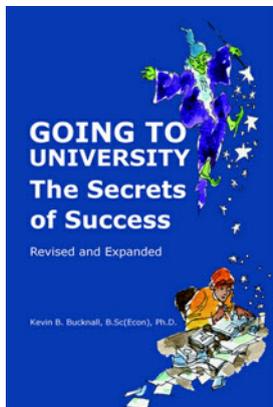
You will notice workers such as airline pilots, many police officers, bus and cab drivers, all staff working on trains and some politicians wearing white gloves. These are considered to be a badge of cleanliness, purity and professional respectability. Many of the heroes in *manga* comics and action video games are also depicted wearing them, presumably to look smart.

Concluding Words

Japanese culture is wonderfully rich and splendidly ancient; my words above are at best a superficial introduction and do not fully do justice to this amazing culture. There is much to be said that remains unsaid and this short presentation should be considered to be a somewhat bald description of the main building blocks of society as I see them. If occasionally it sounds harsh, if I have missed out important elements, or over-stressed some parts, I apologize. I love this culture and my one regret is that I stumbled across it a lot later in life than I might have.

(Extracted and adapted from Kevin Bucknall, *Japan: Doing Business in a Unique Culture*, Boson Books, North Carolina, USA, 2006, Chapter 1.)

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The author's latest book is *Going to University: the Secrets of Success*, 2nd Revised and Expanded Edition, Kewei Press, UK, 2009. The recommended retail price is £9.95. An excerpt can be downloaded from www.keweipress.com A Kindle version is now available, priced £3.45 (inc. VAT), or in United States currency \$4.99. Details and links on the Kewei Press site.

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