Introductory Essay to the Year of Japan

Japan: A Land of Innovation

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“Japan has long been famous for its ability to take on new foreign elements, reshaping and reinterpreting them to its particular cultural needs.” (Smythe, 102)

The following introductory essay is meant to help participants better understand the rich and complex history of Japan, the country of focus for Kennesaw State University’s 30th annual “Year of” Study Program. Throughout the 2013-2014 academic year, the KSU campus will engage in an intensive program of study that includes a weekly lecture series, film series, numerous performances and exhibits, faculty and student learning communities, an international academic conference, a special issue of the Journal of Global Initiatives, and extensive involvement from local Japanese and Japanese-American community groups as well as Japanese partner institutions and organizations abroad. The program represents one of KSU’s most successful means for developing international, intercultural, and interdisciplinary competencies. Annually, it results in the creation of new courses and curriculum, research projects, education abroad programs, and global partnerships.

The early societies of Japan are recognized as the first to make pottery beginning roughly around 10,000 B.C.E. (Varley, 2). Wet rice cultivation was introduced to Japan from China around 300-400 B.C.E. and has remained a staple crop of Japan ever since. The indigenous religious belief system of Japan is known as Shinto, where spirits or kami inhabit nature and look after families and villages. Shinto shrines can be found throughout Japan. Buddhism came to Japan from Korea in about the middle of the sixth century. Throughout much of Japan’s history,
Korea played an instrumental role in the transmission of culture from China to Japan. Confucianism also influenced Japan’s philosophical ideas and social structures. Many Chinese ideas were adapted to fit Japan’s unique culture and circumstances. Similar to China where the emperor ruled through the mandate of heaven based upon the maintenance of virtues, in Japan this notion was given further authority under beliefs associated with Amaterasu, the mythological Sun Goddess, who bestowed upon the imperial family as her descendants the sacred right to rule eternally. The Nara period (710-784) saw a rapid growth of Buddhism in Japan and today the oldest wooden buildings in the world are at the Hōryūji Temple complex (constructed in 607 and rebuilt after a fire in 670) in Nara prefecture which actually predates the move of the capital to the city. It was also about this time that Japan adopted the name Nihon or Nippon or the Land of the Rising Sun. The torii gate marks the entrance to Shinto shrines and has along with the image of the rising sun been incorporated into the Year of Japan logo which was designed by KSU students.

A mixture of Chinese characters and kana (hiragana and katakana), Japanese is the most complex written language in the world (Varley, 36). The Japanese have a great appreciation of poetry and incorporate it into many aspects of literature including novels, diaries, and love letters. It is said to have the power to soothe the hearts of fierce warriors (Kimbrough, 52). Early compilations of poetry date back to the eighth century and include the use of the tanka form of 31 syllables and five lines of 5, 7, 5, 7 and 7 that became the standard for the next five hundred years. A unique feature of the poetry is its use of pivot words that have double or even triple meanings (Varley, 44). Another defining characteristic of Japanese poetry is its focus on nature and the changing of the seasons. As Paul Varley has noted, “the Japanese seek beauty in nature not in what is enduring or permanent, but in the fragile, the fleeting, and the perishable (46).”
One of the most enduring periods of Japanese history is known as the Heian period (794-1185) in which the capital was moved to Kyoto, a place renowned for its beautiful gardens. Poetry especially flourished during the Heian period. The famous novel, *The Tale of Genji*, was written by Murasaki Shikubu, a lady-in-waiting in the Heian imperial court, and includes extensive use of the *tanka*. The story provides intricate details about life at court, especially the heart-rending intrigues of the amorous adventures and misadventures of Prince Genji. It also highlights nature by comparing the changes of the seasons with human emotions and the life cycle. It has long been considered an exquisite expression of Japanese high culture and the search for human happiness (Addis, 55-57). *The Pillow Book* is also written by a woman author, Sei Shōnagon, and in a tone that is at times surprisingly critical of male privilege common to the era. Within Japanese Buddhism at the time, it was considered much more difficult for women to attain enlightenment than for men. And under the rules of Confucian filial piety, women were also said to have Three Obediences in life: the first to her parents, then to her husband, and finally to her children. Nonetheless, the status of women in the Heian court was quite high and their time-honored works of literature are prized for their aesthetic sensibilities.

Powerful family clans have exerted great influence over Japan throughout its history. In the Heian period most notably was the Fujiwara clan, followed by the bitter rivalry between the Taira and Minamoto clans during the late Heian Period, resulting in the defeat of the Taira, and establishment of the shogunate under Minamoto in the Kamakura period (1185-1333). Power struggles between clans gave rise to Samurai warrior culture, described at length in war stories such as *The Tale of Heike* which later formed the basis of the dramatic and supernatural *nō* and kabuki theatre.
Interestingly, it was during the Kamakura period that Japanese Zen Buddhism took shape, known in part for its belief in *satori* or sudden enlightenment sometimes brought on by the literary technique of Zen *koans*, a short form of questions and answers exchanged by master and disciple. It was, in part, the strict adherence to self-discipline and control and the master/disciple relationship that Zen Buddhism is so well known for that also seemed to have characterized samurai culture and continues to influence the martial arts today. *Bushido*, or the way of the warrior, emphasizes “compassionate steadfastness, complete moral honesty, inability to compromise, and action through belief” (Richie, 242). No action should be wasted and all actions should be sincere. Such values are also expressed in Japanese admonishments to avoid imprudent talk. In this way, actions are valued more than words (Smythe, 192). And while “the majority of medieval samurai were rough unlettered men engaged in a brutal profession,” the high level warriors or warlords were mostly learned and accomplished men who emphasized honor, respect, and loyalty to their teachers (Varley, 104).

Very powerful samurai, or *daimyos*, in the 16th century included Oda Nobunaga (1543-82), Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536-98) and Tokugawa Ieyasu (1542-1616). Nobunaga’s and Hideyoshi’s often ruthless campaigns served to expand and unify their holdings which was then followed by 250 years of “Great Peace” under Tokugawa rule (1600-1867) and saw the Shogun’s capital move to Edo (Tokyo) while the Emperor remained in Kyoto until 1869 and the Meiji Restoration. Edo quickly became the cultural and artistic center of the country known especially for its woodblock prints, *ukiyo-e* or floating world art, kabuki theatre, bunraku puppetry, and haiku poetry. The woodblock prints of Kitagawa Utamaro, Katsushika Hokusai, and Ando Hiroshige influenced and inspired Western artists like Claude Monet and Vincent van Gogh as well as many more since (Addis, 95). It was also during this period that the first Europeans
arrived in Japan. The Portuguese came in the 16\textsuperscript{th} century, and introduced Catholicism. The Dutch came in the 17\textsuperscript{th} century and were the only European power allowed to trade with Japan (and only on the artificial island of Dejima in the port of Nagasaki) because they were not Catholic and promised not to engage in missionary activities. Although Japan was an exporter of weapons in East and Southeast Asia, the “seclusion policy” served the Tokugawa shogunate as both a way to limit Christianity’s influence and to limit the power of the daimyo by preventing them to engage freely in foreign trade and the importation of military weaponry. An important development to the success of the Tokugawa period was the implementation of “alternate attendance” where the daimyo were required to spend every other year living at court in Edo and to leave their wives and children in Edo when they returned to the provinces. In this way, Edo also became an economic hub and the merchant class catering to the needs of the daimyos and their families grew significantly.

By the early 1800’s as Russian, British, and American ships increasingly entered Japanese waters, it was apparent that Japan would have a hard time keeping foreign powers at bay. Following China’s defeat to Great Britain in the Opium War (1839-1842), Japan’s “seclusion policy” faced serious threat. The response from some Japanese scholars was a call for “Eastern morals and Western technology,” or a merging of the perceived strengths of the different cultures (Varley, 234).

In 1853, Commodore Perry steamed into Edo Bay and in 1854 succeeded in signing a “Treaty of Friendship” that opened some ports, included the most-favored-nation clause, and eventually allowed for extraterritoriality through the 1858 Harris treaty, provisions that were unequal and unfair. The Tokugawa period ended with younger, activist samurai rallying around the Emperor Meiji. The Meiji Restoration embarked on an aggressive path towards
modernization with the primary purpose of “strengthening the military and enriching the nation.” As part of the modernization efforts, universal military conscription was instituted in 1873, a sure sign of the samurai’s demise. Still, some traditional aspects of Japanese society retained their strength and a very nationalistic Japan organized itself on a hierarchical structure with the emperor at the head of a very “obedient Confucian family” (Varley, 248). With the Meiji Restoration and through the zaibatsu large business consortiums, Japan rapidly transformed itself from a feudal society to an industrial society.

Japan went to war with China in 1894 and with Russia in 1904 and triumphed in both. Japan’s military successes increasingly led to more ultranationalist perspectives, and by the time of World War I, Japan had become a successful capitalist empire exercising control over most of Manchuria and Korea. The puppet state of Manchukuo was established in 1932, Japan withdrew from the League of Nations in 1933, and began the second Sino-Japanese War in 1937.

Japan’s surprise attack on Americans at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 coincided with attacks on Guam, the Philippines and on the British in Hong Kong and Singapore the same day (December 8 due to the dateline time difference). Japan’s claims of wanting to create a “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere” was used as justification for aggression which led to a brutal war in the Asia-Pacific region (1941-45), and ultimately to the catastrophic atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945. The war claimed the lives of more than 7 million Japanese and 15 million of its Asian opponents. The Japanese were responsible for serious and extensive war crimes especially against the Chinese and Koreans. During the war both the United States and Japan demonized and dehumanized each other with both sides committing atrocities (Kingston, 8). After the war, the American occupation of Japan has been
generally viewed as quite successful as Japan began de-militarizing and rebuilding its economy. The relatively rapid transformation from hostile rivalry to friendly alliance is remarkable.

Following the devastation of war, Japan focused its full attention on rebuilding its infrastructure and economy. Few would have predicted its miraculous success. An important boost to Japan’s economy came in the way of military spending by the United States for the war in Korea. Indeed, the Cold War significantly shaped U.S. policy towards Japan resulting in support for the more centralized power of the *keiretsu* (business conglomerates) (Kingston, 13). Japan’s success has mostly been attributed to the close relationship between business and government under the dominance of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which ruled Japan from 1955-2009 with a brief interruption in 1993-94. The Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) came to power in 2009 by promising to focus its attention on developing greater transparency and accountability in government. In December of 2012, the LDP returned to power.

In the 1950s and 60s, the LDP oversaw a period of rapid economic growth with a relatively equal distribution of benefits. The government was extremely successful at picking winners especially supporting the consumer electronics and automobile industries, which were also rapidly becoming champions of innovation. The government kept interest rates low which favored capital borrowing. At the same time, Japanese families tended to save money providing banks with plenty of capital to loan out. Growth slowed in the 1970’s primarily due to rising oil prices but rebounded in the 1980’s with wildly popular video and gaming technology — think Donkey Kong and Super Mario Brothers. Gradually, inflation and rising home prices took its toll especially after the bubble economy of the late 1980’s burst and a decade-long recession hit in the 1990’s. In response, the recession was tackled through government privatization and deregulation efforts that resulted in more pronounced differences between the rich and poor in
Japan (Kingston 28-30). Severe financial distress in Japan has likely contributed to rising suicide rates among working-age men.

Throughout history, the Japanese have had a reputation for fine craftsmanship and product innovation, and in the modern era especially, for manufacturing precision instruments that are compact and efficient. Japan was the first “Asian Tiger” providing high quality consumer goods at relatively low prices. With Japan’s rapid industrialization also came severe stress on the environment which eventually led to a higher level of environmental awareness. Today, Japan has some of the highest standards in the world for food quality. It is also interesting to note that as Japan has expanded its export markets, it now produces more cars and consumer electronics outside Japan than it does inside Japan.

The close relationship that has developed between Japan and the United States is nuanced. Japan’s constitution forbids the nation to wage war. Yet the United States under the controversial ANPO treaty has had a large military presence in Japan especially in Okinawa since WWII. Japan’s own Self-Defense Force has one of the largest defense budgets in the world. While it is a large budget, it accounts for just 1% of the GNP. Beginning in 1978, Japan also began to pay for hosting U.S. troops. Because of Japan’s close military and economic relationship with the United States, Japan has tended to follow the U.S. foreign policy agenda. For example, Japan provided $13 billion in financial support to the 1990-1991 Gulf War. However, there are notable exceptions, including Japan’s opposition to the International Monetary Fund’s recommendations during the 1997 Asian currency crisis (Kingston, 52-53). Beyond the military and economic relationships, one of the best examples of the close cultural ties between the two countries is the shared love of baseball.
In 2007, Japan ranked 54 out of 93 nations on the United Nations gender empowerment index and has one of the lowest rates of working women among the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) nations. Moreover, on average women in Japan only earn 60% as much as men and only 10% of managers are women (Kingston, 64). Government legislation has tried to improve opportunities and conditions for women at work and to achieve work/life balance but change has been slow. Traditionally, women have had extensive family responsibilities including caring for aging parents. The aging of Japanese society is also one of the most critical social issues facing Japan. Twenty-one percent of Japan’s population is over the age of 65, life expectancy is 84 one of the highest in the world, and there are more than 40,000 Japanese over the age of 100. The aging of Japan is also in part due to low birth rates (1.39 per women) well below replacement rate and one of the lowest in the world. With such low birth rates, it is imperative that more women join the workforce which will in turn also increase the need for caregivers for the elderly. Japan has generally not promoted immigration as a strategy to deal with growing labor shortages. Japan’s current unemployment rate is at 4.1%.

Outside the immediate family, kinship relationships in Japan carry little importance, especially in comparison to the corporate work group (Nakane, 6-7). While individual autonomy is not suppressed, group identity with one’s hometown, school, or workplace is highly valued. The relationship between employer and employee is extremely valued and carefully managed. Seniority, experience, and age are critical factors governing such relationships. Mentoring and guiding junior staff is an important responsibility that also results in a strong sense of loyalty and obligation. Within the vertical hierarchy of Japanese organizations both managers and workers are bound by duties and responsibilities to each other and therefore they tend to work in an atmosphere of “maximum consultation” especially within smaller work units or groups (Nakane,
Japanese companies and management systems are well-known for the emphasis placed on teamwork and quality control. In such organizations, everyone looks out for each other. Generally speaking in Japanese businesses, “decision-making is diffused and responsibility is concentrated.” Management guru, Edward Demming’s Quality Control Circles (QCC) stemmed from his work in Japan where problem solving is done in teams at the most immediate and applied levels (Hall, 71). According to intercultural communication specialist Edward Hall, “to the Japanese, leadership means an individual’s ability to listen carefully to others and to work to achieve group consensus and harmony” (78). Although group consensus and harmony is emphasized in Japan, individuality is also recognized. Karen Smythe in her detailed analysis of Inari worship notes that it is highly personalized - recognizing that the personal in Japan is private and carefully protected (Smythe, 206). Interestingly, Inari shrines are considered particularly efficacious in terms of providing success in business endeavors. More importantly, individual effort and achievement in schools and business is considered critical for success.

Japan has endured 20 percent of the world’s earthquakes. Critics assert that the 1995 Kobe earthquake was made much worse because of poor construction and slow emergency response (Kingston, 90). And as with the nuclear meltdown at Fukushima following the tsunami in the Tohoku region in 2011, Japan is keenly aware of the sudden and unpredictable wrath of nature and the need for disaster prevention, preparation, and response measures. The nation’s dependence on nuclear energy has come under serious scrutiny and all reactors were taken offline following the Fukushima disaster for safety reasons. Due to the country’s susceptibility to earthquakes, Japan is a world leader in researching and developing preventive measures as well as responding to natural disasters often being the first nation to come to the aid of others in need. Designated the site of the Third World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction in 2015, Japan
endorses human security as a pillar of its foreign policy. The country has lent its expertise in the aftermath of the Haiti earthquake in 2010, the East Africa draught crisis in 2011 and the Sahel food crisis in 2012. It participated in these efforts even as the country mobilized and coordinated global response to its own national crises. There is much to learn from Japan’s experience and leadership in confronting human security threats brought on by natural disasters, economic crisis, environmental degradation and climate change.

Japan, a diverse archipelago of 6,852 islands in the Pacific Ocean, has the world's tenth-largest population — more than 127 million people. Tokyo comprises the world’s largest metropolitan area with more than 30 million residents. Geopolitically, the country lies to the east of China, North Korea, South Korea and Russia. Its technology-driven economy remains the world’s third largest. Japanese are among the best-educated in the world with an illiteracy rate of less than one percent (Hall, 49). It is also one of the safest countries in the world. Japan has a strong civil society with an active press. It is a nation steeped in traditional values and actively engaged in the world.

Japanese toys, games, animation, and movies have had an enormous impact on youth culture that resonates with an entire generation of young Americans who have grown up with new concepts and a positive outlook on both Japan and Asia as a result of these cultural media exports. It is our sincere hope that the Year of Japan program will provide our students and community with a rich context for understanding Japan. The Year of Japan is about making the unfamiliar familiar, and the implicit explicit. The more we know about other countries and cultures, the better we will understand this diverse world in which we live. Thus begins this journey into better understanding Japan, a land of innovation with the proven ability to transform tragedy into success.
REFERENCES


