A Japanese View of Americans

By Jennie Smith

When Yoshio Sakurauchi, the Speaker of the Lower House of the Japanese Diet, spoke of the inferiority of American labor, a strange chemical behavior plagued Americans, as if the remark had been a long-awaited confirmation of weekly news opinion polls. Americans seem to feel the loss of Japanese respect as gravely as any economic loss. While radical groups in other nations may burn the US flag daily, Americans focus on the condescension of one Japanese politician. This heightened sensitivity to the opinions of the Japanese may reflect a fear that the Japanese will deprive US citizens of the post-occupation status enjoyed for so long in this country. Americans enjoy Japanese deference to their customs, industries, culture, military influence, and civilian presence. During a year of living in Japanese homes, attending a Japanese high school, and struggling with traditions I still do not understand, I found that the Japanese populace holds Americans in high regard, even if that respect is not voiced by the political elite.

Kiichiro, my host father while I lived and studied in Oita, Japan, is a fifty-two year-old kimono dealer who works long hours in a store bearing his family name and crest. In taking me into his house, he showed me a world that was at once foreign and familiar. He would drink whiskey and sing Beatles songs while his wife snickered at his every missed note, and we ate dried squid for snacks. One night, I asked Kiichiro why he had decided to take an American into his house, and as his drunkenness deepened, he told me about the post-war Japan that was his childhood. For him, there was none of the conflict that a sudden infusion of Western culture brought to an older generation. He watched John Wayne movies for entire days, played "General MacArthur" with his friends, and was not aware of the need to distinguish the new American country of the movies from his own Japanese background. This distinction was not easy for him to make; occupation-era Japan was neither the Japan his parents had known, nor the America that occupation forces had hoped to provide. America was his dream. Aside from brushing the US border on his group honeymoon to Canada, I was the closest Kiichiro had ever come to the United States. His wife, an America aficionado who loves Audrey Hepburn and prefers bread to rice, later told me that the gentle, "Americaphilic" Kiichiro used to abuse her for implying that the people of America and other countries were equal in intelligence and industriousness to the Japanese.

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Kiichiro's double-edged perspective did not surprise me as much as it might have. I did not see his nostalgia toward the America of his childhood as belying his belief in US inferiority. The complex Japanese code of respect allows them to genuinely admire America while also harboring feelings of Japanese superiority or memories of a catastrophic war. Such attitudes have prevailed throughout the history of Japan's interactions with the West, beginning with their 1854 and 1858 treaties with Commodore Perry. The Japanese adopted the motto "wakon yosai," a term meaning "keep Western technology and reject Western ideology."

With the advent of controlled and deliberate Westernization came forceful swings in attitudes towards the West. Some Japanese even advocated interbreeding among Japanese and Westerners so as to "improve" the Japanese race, while others wanted to unite with the rest of Asia to prevent the evil spread of Westernization. Only later did the now recognized concept of Japanese "superiority" arise. Ironically, much of the "superiority" was really a response to prohibitive immigration laws enacted by the US in the early part of this century. The Japanese, after having reckoned themselves equal to Westerners, found themselves grouped with the Chinese in our immigration laws and barred from entering the country. Japanese resentment and pride intensified due to further rejections from the West after World War I, when the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 turned down Japan's proposal to abolish racial discrimination in the League of Nations. In its early racist rejection of Japanese and other Asians, America helped catalyze such anti-Western reactions.

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In the long aftermath of World War II, Japanese sentiments of "superiority" rarely surfaced. In fact, they were usually concealed—as in the case of Kiichiro—with embarassment. These feelings simply do not exist for most Japanese. For example, I met some elderly women in the rice fields and conversed briefly with them. These women remember eating only rice and salted plums during a war in which they lost sons. After overcoming their polite shyness, the women demonstrated a sincere interest in America as we chatted next to tunnels they had carved into the mountainside to protect them from the bombs of 1945. I compare the

sentiments of these elderly Japanese to those of my veteran grandfather, who intentionally misdirects Japanese tourists and boycotts the Japanese owned golf courses.

The American media has perpetuated a misconception by portraying young Japanese, stunted in social immaturity by their parents' money and care, and clinging to American fads with fanaticism. The distinct interests of

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Japanese youths in the English language, heavy-metal music, Los Angeles culture, and Western-style weddings are tempered by the absolute severity of their student lives, standardized school curriculum, cram schools, job training, and a rigid discipline. These characteristics facilitate the connection between being serious and being Japanese. Thus, newer, distinctively-American imports specific to young people, such as rap music or pizza, are valued as occasional releases for contained energies. Much of what we credit as American influences in Japan have become Japanese in much the same way that imports like pasta and constitutionalism have become American staples. While this love of release may lead young Japanese to associate America with a more carefree country than their own, their interest in America is still not satisfied by the many available American products and trends or their numerous Japanese-made imitations. Through my friends' patience with me, their concern that I adjust to Japan slowly and without prodding, their incessant questioning, and their desire to travel to or study in America, I found a deep Japanese desire to understand Americans.

Reflecting upon this interest is a generation-spanning shift in "Westernization," by Japanese standards, to "Americanization," well after the changes forced by the World

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War I occupation. While some changes are official-for instance, the English language is now uniformly taught with an American, rather than British, accent. Other changes are more subtle, as demonstrated by observations that Japanese and American persons get along famously well at international conferences. Europeans and Japanese, although cordial, are on stiffer terms. Even those Japanese who have never met an American do not feel distanced from the United S tates; America is everywhere, and the identification process begins early.

When statements of Japanese officials, like Sakurauchi's, conflict with the view of the Japanese people who maintain a love of America (and not just Americana), there is something wrong. The Japanese are acutely aware that their political representatives, top bureaucrats, and company heads are an elite group whose opinions do not reflect those of the Japanese majority. This elite minority becomes estranged from the general populace at the educational stages. In recent years, up to 94 percent of the bureaucrats in a single ministry have been Tokyo University graduates, while the remaining elite are graduates from one of Japan's prestigious, formerly-imperial universities. There are kindergartens, grade schools, junior high schools, and high schools associated with specific universities, so as to provide a one-track entrance into schools like Tokyo University. In some cases, children of the elite are subjected to kindergarten entrance exams for placement that should lead them into the top universities. Although the entrance exams to Tokyo University are merit-based, admission policies consider other, extraneous factors; the children of

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politicians and bureaucrats constitute a large proportion of Tokyo University's student body. Top-level bureacrats are highly regarded in Japan, and common practice allows them to "retire" into the presidencies and vice-presidencies of Japan's largest corporations.

As oligarchical as this system may seem, it is tremendously effective in coordinating Japanese industry, trade, legislation, and budget balancing, but it does not reflect the opinions of the populace. Unfortunately, it is from this elite realm that the voice of Japan is carried to us. This is the voice through which the Japanese people are judged. Most Japanese are, by our standards, apolitical, and even their newspapers reflect little more than a moderate consensus of political opinion. To most Japanese people, the assertion that American workers are lazy is irrelevant Their deeper interest in, and love for, America is fed by the ideas of possibility and fantasy that our "dreamland" culture never fails to provide.

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Jennie Smith is a Columbia College first-year student.