

RJC Academy: Preparing to go course BEFORE I GO: AN OVERVIEW OF JAPAN

Learning to understand the Japanese Worldview

Step 1 is to decide ‘WHO is your TARGET GROUP?’ Is it children, teenagers, college students, women or business men?

Step 2 is to consider the WORLD VIEW of your chosen group.

World View consists of :

- Beliefs (beware that people may say they believe something but behave in a way that implies they believe otherwise)
- Key events and national history (national identity forms part of an individual’s identity)
- Interpretations of key events (these are generally more important than the events themselves (e.g. how my non Christian Japanese friend responded to riots against Japan in China in 2005... ‘The Chinese have no right to interfere in what Japan decides to do’ ...was more important than the riots themselves).

World View is shaped through:

- Transmission of belief systems (from earliest childhood, this is “caught” not “taught”)
- Icons (key people in Japanese history past and present)
- Cultural artifacts, books, movies, mass media school curricula.

How can we uncover the World View of the Japanese groups we seek to reach? Or to put it another way, how do we get into their heads?

You can start by asking questions. Of course, you will not find one single answer to your questions but there are generally underlying assumptions that are accepted without question by most people.

Examples of questions you might ask are as follows:

- Who are some of the key Japanese who have shaped Japanese history? Why did they have such an impact?
- Who are the key people in public life and popular culture today? The list might include TV and movie stars, musicians, pop groups, sports (Ichiro in baseball, sumo wrestlers) fashion leaders as well as politicians.
- What books has every Japanese read? (children’s stories, manga, mukashi banashi (folk tales), Japanese literature, detective stories). If you can’t read in Japanese read translations in English of e.g. Endo Shusaku etc.
- Are there any haiku, children’s songs, games that everyone knows? (yubikiri, ジャンケン、 e.g. becoming an ichi nensei (playing in every shop around spring time)

- What movies, animation and TV programs have they all watched perhaps many times? (Chushingura, Hayao Miyazaki, Otoko wa Tsurai yo, NHK renzoku dramas, etc) What are the current favorites and why?
- Which Japanese Christians are known to non-churched Japanese and why? (e.g. Miura Ayako, Sono Ayako, Hoshino Tomohiro, Uchida Kazuhiko, Watanabe Kazuko.) If you don't know one or more of these names, then your first assignment is to ask some Japanese friends to tell you about them.

You want to discover the assumptions Japanese take for granted but because they take them for granted, individuals might not be able to give you insight into them unless you ask the right questions to unlock the answers. Much of your informal research will be by trial and error. Talk to as many different people as you can. Remember also that popular culture is changing all the time so you will need to keep researching.

This article is partly based on an outline of a lecture by David Broesma, Institute for Cross-Cultural Training, Wheaton, Illinois in March 2006.

- 1. It's important to know something about the history, geography and culture of Japan. This is so we can understand their worldview a little better. The more we understand their worldview hopefully the more effective we can be in ministering to the Japanese.**
 - a. Based upon your reading, please a paragraph or two of Japan (It could be historical, or it could be about something new you learned about Japan).**
- 2. How does the knowledge you've gained from your reading help you with understanding the Japanese worldview?**

ORIENTATION of JAPAN

The following information is a brief overview of Japanese culture. You can obtain more information from the Japanese National Tourist Organization, JNTO, on the internet at www.jnto.go.jp/eng

Climate

Most of Japan, except the most northern and southern parts, experience four seasons. Summer is hot, humid, with occasional thundershowers and typhoons at the end of the season. Fall is pleasant, ending in cold, crisp weather. Winter is cold and dry, with the more northern parts being filled with snow. Spring is pleasant, shifting from cool, dry weather to the humid, rainy season.

Geography:

Japan is a nation composed of hundreds of islands including four large ones: Honshu, Hokkaido, Shikoku, and Kyushu. The geography of the islands can be characterized by mountains, short alluvial river deltas, and thousands of small and large bays and inlets. Japan's 127 million people live in 16 % of their country because 84% is covered by uninhabitable mountains!

Much of Japan's population today is in a narrow band of land running from the large Kanto plain on which sits the Tokyo-Yokohama metropolitan area south along the east coast of Honshu to the Kansai area of Osaka/Kyoto/Kobe. On the plains in this area live over half the people of Japan as well as one of the largest concentrations of industry and commerce in the world.

Food:

The basic diet of Japan generally consists of fresh foods from a particular region. The main staples are rice and noodles (*soba* and *ramen*). Vegetables are in abundance. Unique to Japan are *daikon*, a kind of radish, and *nasu*, a kind of eggplant. From the meat group, fish, either cooked or raw (*sushi*), and seafood are commonly eaten. Chicken and pork are also widely consumed. Pork that is fried in a breaded batter is called *tonkatsu*. Beef is also eaten, but it is more expensive. The most common dish is a beef bowl, or *gyudon*, which is thinly slice beef over rice. Another popular dish is curry. Japan has cuisine from all over the world. In any major shopping district, there are restaurants that serve Chinese, Italian, and American food. There are variations to the dishes, such as squid as a topping for pizza! The market for fast food restaurants has grown, too, as McDonald's and Kentucky Fried Chicken are almost everywhere.

Housing

Japanese homes are usually smaller than American homes. The building requires efficient use of space. Futons are placed in the closet during the day, and taken out for sleeping at night. The bathroom and the toilet are separate. In the winter, rooms are heated separately with small portable units that usually use kerosene. Some homes have a *kotatsu*, a low table with a heating unit underneath. A blanket is placed on top of the table so one can put their feet underneath to stay warm. Laundry is typically hung outside to dry.

Clothing

The Japanese are very contemporary in their clothing styles. Most people wear Western style clothes. Students often wear uniforms to school. In the city, office workers, especially women, may dress in a standard company outfit, while men wear a traditional suit and tie. The only time people wear more traditional style clothing, such as *kimonos*, seems to be for Japanese festivals or special events.

Crime

Compared to America, Japan is a relatively safe country. In suburban or rural areas, people may leave their doors unlocked. People leave car engines running while they get a drink from a vending machine. If you lose something like a wallet at a train station, you might get the wallet back with everything inside!

On the other hand, certain crimes of opportunity exist, mostly in the urban areas. Bicycles get stolen because someone needs to get to the train station in a hurry. Molesters, or *chikan*, may be lurking on packed trains, because women are afraid of yelling that they are being victimized. Children at school who do not have many friends are often bullied, which often leads to suicide. Many of the social ills of western society,

such as murder, domestic violence, etc., are becoming more common, or at least publicized, on TV. Fortunately, since most people do not have access to guns, there is less chance of armed robbery than in the U.S.

Time Zone

During standard time, Japan is seventeen hours ahead of Los Angeles time, and sixteen hours ahead during daylight savings time.

Example: during standard time, when it is 8 p.m. in Los Angeles, it is 1 p.m. the next day in Tokyo.

Religions of Japan

Shinto—Shintoism is an indigenous religion of Japan which has no organized body of teachings nor moral code, and no historical order. Its chief features are the worship of nature (animism), ancestors, and ancient national heroes. Belief in the Emperor as God was its major focus until the end of World War II. One typically goes to a Shinto shrine to ask for blessings from the gods. The shrines are visited on major occasions, such as New Years, for children's birthdays, or to pray for success in college entrance exams. Amulets to protect individuals from traffic accidents or fortunes to help one find a marriage partner are often purchased at the shrines.

Buddhism—or *Bukkyo* was founded in India during the 5th century BC. Its ultimate goal is to attain enlightenment, a state of spiritual emancipation and freedom achieved by understanding and practicing the Buddhist teachings. It teaches that correct living and self-denial will enable the soul to reach nirvana, a divine state of release from bodily pain and sorrow. Japan has adapted and modified Buddhism so that it uniquely fits its own culture. Many Japanese claim they are Buddhist by tradition, yet do not understand the rituals performed at the temples. Funerals are mostly performed at a Buddhist temple.

History of Christianity in Japan—The Jesuit priest, Francis Xavier, first brought the Gospel of Jesus Christ to Japan in 1549. The Jesuits were able to make nearly 300,000 converts in the 100 years that followed. But they and the church became involved in the political struggles which ended with the supremacy of the Tokugawa military government in 1615. Christianity was outlawed and all who did not recant were killed. For over 250 years, there was only a scattered underground church. During the Meiji Era (1868-1912), Christianity was reintroduced to Japan through Western Christians. Because of the adaptation of Western culture to Japanese culture during this period, Christianity is perceived as a “Western” religion. Statistically, 1 % of the 126 million people in Japan are considered Christians. The most popular aspect of Christianity borrowed by Japanese is wedding ceremonies.

Modern Day Cults—Some Japanese who find the emptiness of their lives not fulfilled by the traditions of Japanese religion turn to cults. These people are not necessarily from the lower classes, but may be highly intellectual people. The most recent cult that threatened the lives of other Japanese people was called Aum Shinrikyo. Their leader, Shoko Asahara, was accused of authorizing a poisoned gas attack in the Tokyo subways in 1995. Most other cults do not wreak such havoc on society, but manipulate the

individuals who join the cults. In major urban centers, some cult members hang around train stations, waiting to find someone who they can pray for. In addition, Jehovah's witnesses and Mormons aggressively try to recruit people.

Modern Politics

Before the 19th century, much of Japan was led by the *Samurai* warriors. After centuries of these feudal landlords ruling Japan, the mid 1800's saw the arrival of new political leadership that united most of modern day Japan. Commodore Perry from the U.S. arrived in 1853 to force Japan to reopen itself to the western world. However, after the Meiji Restoration period in the late 1800's, Japan led a military expansion into other parts of Asia. The Emperor was seen as a divine God.

After World War II, the U.S. defeat of Japan caused the political structure to assume a more democratic system of government. The government consists of a parliament, with important duties given to the prime minister. The longest ruling party is the Liberal Democratic Party. The name of the party is peculiar because its belief system actually appeals to more conservative values, usually the farming constituency in the countryside. The Japanese have copied our western education system, and the reliance on U.S. military for protection has allowed the government to focus on redeveloping the Japanese economy.

Customs

Gift giving is a traditional custom and an important part of etiquette in Japan. Whenever you are invited to someone's home as a guest, you will take a gift for the hostess or family. Most often the gift is a box of candy, cake or fruit that can be shared. The Japanese are very generous, so you will want to be prepared with gifts of appreciation. You should give gifts to your homestay family, students, people you work with at your church, and other people's homes you will visit.

Gift Suggestions: In general, anything from your hometown, state, province, or area of the country makes a great gift. Depending on your recipient, you may want to give something Christian. Typical gifts are:

Boxed candy or nuts,

Boxed dry fruit

Jams and Jellies

Packages of flavored tea

Stationery

Picture Frame

Commemorative Coins

A product your town is famous for (for example, in Los Angeles, a Laker cap or emblem)

The cost of the gift should not be an issue, it is the expression of gratitude. So if you want to **make** something, go ahead!

Presentation of the gift can be upon arrival or after getting settled at the home. As a westerner, you are not expected to know the precise time of presentation!

Gift Wrapping: this is almost as important as the gift itself. Bring wrapping paper with you and wrap the gifts just before you give them. Bring scissors, tape, and ribbon, too. Gift bags are also good for last minute gift wrapping. Don't bring small flowers, such as daisies or chrysanthemums, they are usually used for graves.

Bring items in amounts of 3's or 5's, but not 4's. Four is considered an unlucky number, because the Japanese word for 4 is *shi*, which also is the same pronunciation for death. At the end of your mission, you may also want to give games, books, and toys from the U.S. that you brought for ministry. Bookmarks with scripture are also good farewell gifts.

Slippers in the Home & Toilets

Normally, you will have to take your shoes off in order to enter a Japanese home. The homes have a *genkan* or entrance where you take off your shoes. The host may turn your shoes to point in the direction you are leaving. If not, you can point them towards the exit.

The host should have a pair of slippers prepared for you to enter the house. Sometimes they may be smaller than your feet, but do not worry about it.

The basic rule about slippers is to do whatever the host is doing. There are rooms with tatami mats (woven mats) that you do not use slippers.

Another room that you do not wear your slippers is the toilet. Inside will be another pair of slippers exclusively for that room. **Do not wear the toilet slippers outside of the toilet** (unless you would like to be source of a little humor)!

The door to the toilet is usually kept closed. Knock before you enter. If occupied, someone will knock back. In the public restrooms, you may find a western-style toilet located where there is handicap access.

Upon leaving the home, there may be a basket where you can place your slippers. Otherwise, your host will take care of it for you.

Meal Time

In a traditional home, it is customary to wait for the husband to start eating. You may not see the wife sit down for the meal because she is busy preparing the different courses. Do not rest your chopsticks (*ohashi*) by sticking them straight up in your rice bowl. It is offensive to do this because it looks like the incense sticks that are placed at a Buddhist altar, which is done in remembrance of deceased family members.

Do not put soy sauce on your rice. Be adventuresome and try to eat the different varieties of food. When eating noodles, it is polite to slurp them. If you have finished eating, you should leave a small amount on your plate or in your bowl, or else the host may think you are still hungry and give you more.

Although you may want to be helpful, your host may not want you in their kitchen. After a relationship has started, such as during a homestay, you may find a way to help in the kitchen.

Train Etiquette

If you are required to take a train in a major city, avoid staring and/or loud talking. Before entering the train, stand to the side on the designated platform to let passengers out. When seated in the train, do not stretch your legs out into the aisle. Do not talk on a cell-phone (keitai) when on the train or in restaurants.

Do not eat or drink inside the commuter trains. You will not have space as people squeeze into the train. There usually is some area on the train platform to consume such items. On an express train, this rule is different, as people may bring *bento* lunch boxes for longer trips.

Language

Spoken—Japanese has various levels of politeness, which requires a quite a bit of study in order to master. However, for common everyday language, a basic knowledge of useful words and phrases can help you “survive” in Japan. In addition, several regions in Japan have a certain dialect, or *ben*, only heard in that area.

If you are a Japanese-American and studied Japanese or learned it at home from your parents, you may still find it helpful to go through the useful expressions below. Phonetically, each syllable usually starts with a consonant and ends with a vowel, with the exception of the “n” sound placed at the end of some words. Refer to the Hiragana and Katakana charts for the explanation of the sounds.

With regards to politeness, you may hear the word *gozaimasu*, which is attached to the end of words. For example, *arigato gozaimasu* means thank you.

Written--Hiragana, Katakana, Kanji, Romaji

Hiragana is a written system for Japanese words. Each character represents a syllabic sound.

Katakana is a written system mostly for foreign words. Example: “knife” is written so that the word sounds like *naifu* or knife.

Kanji are Chinese characters used for Japanese words. The Kanji character is written with a Hiragana character after it. Sometimes two Kanji are written together to represent one Japanese word.

Romaji is the Romanized or English spelling of Japanese words so Westerners can pronounce the words.

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Internet information

[http://www.omf.org/omf/japan/ministry/japanese_language_center/japanese_language_re
sources](http://www.omf.org/omf/japan/ministry/japanese_language_center/japanese_language_resources)

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