



# Encountering Culture in Development: The Experience of Course Participants in Japan, 1962-2002

*This article explores the presentation of the Japanese host culture to course participants from developing countries. By introducing visiting fellows to a culture defined as Japanese, the host country designs a cultural encounter, where Japanese culture appears to be both a potential for clashes in daily life and to provide icons of the survival of an invented indigenous national culture in the face of development.*

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"Despite [...] technological achievements [Japan] has preserved its oriental culture." (Aponso Jackson Nor, Sri Lanka in *Kenshū-in*, 1974, 31: 11)

## Development and Culture

In 1962, during the same period when many other donor countries launched similar programs, the Japanese Foreign Ministry established the Overseas Technical Cooperation Agency (OTCA), which was absorbed into the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA) in 1974. OTCA/JICA invited well-educated individuals from developing countries to Japan as part of technical cooperation efforts funded by Official Development Assistance. According to the members of the United Nations in the late 1940s, it was crucial to supplement the transfer of material and capital with know-how for long-term impact. How could this be done most effectively? A standard approach has been to invite well-educated bureaucrats or professionals from developing countries to visit so-called donor countries for purposes of study for shorter or longer periods of time. In Japan, course participants come for anywhere from two-weeks to two-years to study such topics as Project Management, Staff Supervision, Rolling Stock Maintenance, or Road Construction. From 1962 to 2002 a total of more than 200,000 people from close to one hundred countries have participated in the courses.

Although the stated objective of the coursework was to impart and develop knowledge of direct consequence for technical and institutional development in developing countries, course organizers in Japan included an introduction to the notion of the host culture. The Japanese host culture was presented in two ways. First, issues of Japanese otherness as contrasted with the cultures of the visiting students was presented as part of the coursework to ensure that visitors studying in Japan would not be overwhelmed by the cultural differences they may encounter during their stay in Japan. Second, the Japanese have proudly and consistently shared notions of traditional Japanese culture as a way of demonstrating that traditional iconographies of culture need not be sacrificed to the goal of successful economic development. JICA designed a cultural encounter specifically tailored to the needs of overseas participants in development assistance programs. This article explores

how hosts and visitors together identified and presented two Japanese cultures – one, the source of potential clashes during the visitors' daily life in Japan and two, icons of the survival of Japanese traditions in spite of development. The two faces of Japanese culture are located in orientation material, newsletters and related material addressed to fellows and trainees visiting from developing countries.

The initial call for an introduction to Japanese culture came from Iranian alumni in response to an evaluation question in 1962. Iranian respondents to a survey conducted by the Overseas Technical Cooperation Agency (OTCA) in Japan in 1962 called for more recreational programs, such as field trips, picnics and visits to Japanese family homes. This was in order for the participants not only to get an impression of the technical situation of Japan, but also the "inner greatness" of Japan in art, culture, and customs. (*Kikoku*, 1962: 8) Several respondents to the questionnaire also suggested that OTCA or the Foreign Ministry prepare pamphlets and films to introduce Japan and its technical cooperation. These suggestions were one reason why, – beginning in 1965, – OTCA published a pamphlet called *Technical Training in Japan*.

## Locating the Presentation of Culture

Orientation material, orientation courses, and newsletters for alumni provided the spaces for presenting Japanese culture to course participants. From 1965, OTCA and later JICA prepared pamphlets and course material for the orientation program for newly arrived overseas participants. The descriptions of culture presented here are located in three places: orientation material for new course participants, newsletters disseminated to all JICA and AOTS course alumni, respectively, and the Internet exemplified by websites. During the stay in Japan overseas students write evaluations, participate in surveys, and engage in face-to-face communication with the Japanese hosts and organizers. Thus the preparatory and follow up material I am describing here can be seen as complementary to the main work of the programs described.

Before they leave their home countries course participants encounter Japanese culture in the packets of ori-



entation material, prepared as part of the course. This is followed up with study tours once students have arrived in Japan. Finally, as opposed to other donors, OTCA and, subsequently, JICA have supported a number of alumni related activities to encourage continued communication of ideas to and from Japan after the trainees have returned home. The first three JICA alumni associations were established in Malaysia (1966), Philippines (1967), and Argentina (1968). Today there are JICA alumni associations in more than eighty-four countries. All OTCA and JICA alumni who have returned to their countries since 1965 receive a newsletter published tri-annually by OTCA (1965-1974) and from 1974 by JICA. The original name of the newsletter was *Kenshū-in* [Trainee], but in 1998 the title was changed to *JICA Network*. All issues of the newsletter include references to various aspects of "Japanese Culture."

### Defining Culture as Clashes and Icons

"Japanese Culture" takes place in two domains: the contemporary Japanese way of living and the sites and customs claimed to pre-date the existence of modern industry in Japan. In a survey about ways to improve upon the course experiences, which was conducted by OTCA in 1962, Iranian respondents called for visits to Japanese families and "ancient sites" in order to better understand Japanese culture. (OTCA, 1962: 8) In 1982, the newsletter *Kenshū-in*, which was distributed to alumni of training courses in Japan, included an article for a column called "Profile" about a JICA course leader, Mr. Kawamura. Mr. Kawamura emphasized how he had taken trainees to museums and Japanese farmers' homes for them to gain insight into both ancient and contemporary Japanese culture. (*Kenshū-in*, 1982, vol. 50: 12) In 2002, the videos and websites prepared for participants and alumni of JICA training courses still include information both on Japanese contemporary way of life and on aspects of "Japanese Culture". For example, the website of the JICA Alumni of Pakistan includes entries concerning Japanese language teaching and others about Obon dance.

In the process of negotiating Japanese culture into the development context of JICA courses, neither JICA representatives nor course participants question what constitutes this culture. Their experiences dictate that the course participants who live in Japan will encounter a contemporary Japanese way of living, which can cause misunderstandings and clashes. An introduction to specific do's and don'ts is an attempt to make visitors aware of unwritten rules and to prevent avoidable frustrations. In addition, the orientation material and the newsletters also present "traditional" Japanese culture as a timeless absolute predating the era of "modern technology and development". This approach to understanding Japanese culture completely ignores the extensive scholarship done on the invention of tradition in tandem with the establishment of the modern. (Hobsbawm, 1983; Vlastos, 1998) The source material is generated for the discussion of clashes and icons, which

overseas participants may encounter during their stay in Japan.

### Potential Clashes in Daily Life

Cleanliness, punctuality, and caution are three key aspects of contemporary Japanese way of living.

OTCA responded in 1965 to the Iranian request for more information about Japanese culture by publishing the first volume of the pamphlet *Technical Training in Japan*. This volume was "designed as a simple guide for those who are coming, or interested in coming to Japan to participate in training activities organized by the Government of Japan." Besides the contribution of knowledge and skills for the benefit of economic and social development in the countries of the participants, the training activities "also aimed at deepening the already existing friendly relationships between the countries and Japan, through the participants' first-hand personal understanding of our country." (OTCA, 1965: 1) In this pamphlet, OTCA included a section entitled "Some Information on Japan," to initiate the development of this "first-hand personal understanding."

What then did OTCA choose to include in this first impression? The list includes the causes for clashes: cleanliness, Japanese lack of experience with foreign languages, Japanese punctuality, and lack of spices in Japanese cuisine. The mention of health and sanitation emphasizes the fondness of Japanese for cleanliness, the fact that Japan had been free from serious epidemics for many years, and that medical facilities were "readily available through the country." The category of people and language describe the Japanese people as homogeneous, ethnically and culturally, and, subsequently, weak in foreign languages. The main point of a discussion of transportation and traffic is that the "[p]ublic transportation is highly developed in Japan." Finally, references to food emphasize that rice is the staple, that food can be expensive, and that few spices are used. The details OTCA chose to include such as lack of spices, high level of sanitation, and highly developed infrastructure all indicate the author's awareness of her readership's interests and reactions to Japan as formulated in questions asked and things noticed by alumni in the program.

The pamphlet *Technical Training in Japan*, third or fourth edition, included the following passage:

#### Orientation

An orientation program is arranged by JICA. This includes talks on JICA administration and on the aspects of Japanese life, customs, and culture. Emphasis is placed on significant differences between Japan and the participants' countries. The talks are intended to help participants to adjust to the Japanese way of life. The program will also include films and sightseeing tours. (JICA, 1976: 3)

According to the material, Japanese people appreciate, expect, and adhere to high standards of cleanliness and punctuality. In addition, the reason why many course



participants find their Japanese neighbors quiet or cold is explained by a Japanese cautiousness with strangers, due to insecurity when confronted with foreign languages.

In 1973, OTCA prepared course material entitled *Japan in a Cross-Cultural Context: Warming up for training*, which was to be used in the introduction class for overseas participants shortly after their arrival in Japan. In the preface the reader was cautioned that "items reproduced here from various sources may be misleading without the instructor's guidance in the class." Unfortunately, we will not be able to enjoy the guidance of the instructor in class, and therefore have to rely on our own reading of the pamphlet – keeping this caution in mind.

By July 5, 2002, thirty years later, the teacher had a new title for the materials: *The Workshop in Cross-Cultural Understanding*. (Watanabe, 2002) In 2002, Watanabe stated her objective as follows: "For the purpose of living in Japan with confidence and composure, participants in the workshop will learn the process of acculturation and acquire knowledge and skills to overcome cross-cultural conflicts." This in contrast to earlier OTCA publications that had focused on a specific Japanese/non-Japanese dichotomy, which were "printed for the convenience of participants in OTCA orientation programs." (JICA, 1973) In 2002, Professor Watanabe defined "culture" universally speaking, as "the way a people lives." On the other hand, *Japan in a Cross-Cultural Context – Warming up for the training* juxtaposed Japan and the country of the participant in a diagram explaining the meeting of Japanese and home culture during international training. This diagram is followed by a series of "Japanese Image" scenarios. In contrast to this the 2002 text says little specifically about Japan and focuses on the intersection of the "process of acculturation" with its three steps – "Knowing About Self," "Learning About Others," and "Acquiring Knowledge and Skills For Cross-Cultural Communication." The difference between the two approaches is mainly the shift from a focus on the specifics of Japan to one on skills for general cross-cultural communication.

#### Targeting Kenya

JICA asked Nagase Osamu, a Japanese man who resided in Kenya, to prepare a guide for Kenyans who were on their way to Japan to participate in courses. In 1986, JICA published the result, *For Your Successful Training and Happy Stay*. Kenyan participants in the program came from the Jomo Kenyatta College for Agriculture and Technology, which was established in 1977 as a joint venture between the Kenyan government and JICA. By signing his preface in Juja, Kenya in January 1986, Nagase situated himself in Kenya.

In the introduction, Nagase emphasized how

Your purpose of going to Japan is dual: development of your skill and knowledge, and understanding of the people of Japan. Both are equally indispensable. Your understanding of the

people and the system you work with is vital for a fruitful transfer of technology. It leads to a happy stay and definitely to a successful training in Japan. (Nagase, 1986: 1)

Nagase's suggestions for further reading give an indication of his primary sources. These included Suzuki T. *Japanese and the Japanese* published in 1978 by Kodansha International Ltd. and *Kodansha Encyclopedia of Japan* published by Kodansha Ltd. in 1983. The two other texts were Mizutani O. and Mizutani N.'s *Nihongo Notes 1 and 2* published by The Japan Times in 1977 and 1979. The language texts reflected the importance Nagase assigned to language skill for happy living in Japan.

Nagase referred to his own experiences in and knowledge of customs in Kenya and juxtaposed these with his description of Japan, for example, when he wrote: "[...], most Japanese in Kenya do not appreciate the daily exercise of being called 'mzungu' on the street. Similarly, being called *gaijin* (foreigner) or *kokujin* (black person), which happens to Africans in Japan, is not definitely a pleasant thing to experience." (Nagase, 1986: 5) He also referred to comments and answered questions from Kenyans, for example, when he wrote, "Some Kenyan trainees to Tottori University complained that when they went shopping in town and said "Konichiwa [Hello]", people were surprised and did not understand at first." (Nagase, 1986: 15-16) By referring to his own experiences in Kenya and by quoting opinions and experiences directly communicated to him by Kenyans upon their return from Japan, Nagase was able to offer suggestions that could be taken into consideration by future participants. He did so in such a way that it might be possible for future participants in the program to avoid cultural clashes that had caused problems previously for trainees from Kenya.

Most of the orientation material targeted a more diverse audience and could therefore not relate as directly to participants from specific countries. However, one common feature of all the orientation material is that it is prepared and/or funded by OTCA or JICA as a response to feedback received from previous participants in the program or from Japanese program managers. This orientation material introduces Japanese culture to new course participants, some of whom may have prior knowledge of Japanese culture obtained from other sources such as schooling, personal connections to alumni of the program, library material, or websites.

In *JICA Network*, the column "My Favorite Things About Japan" volume 1-13 (1998-2002) consisted of a dialogue where the editor posed one or two questions, to which he printed answers from current overseas participants. For example, "What do you think about the trains and subways in Tokyo?" in volume 11, where most of the answers pertained to the effectiveness of the trains and the coldness of the Japanese people while they were on the trains.

In *JICA Network* volume 12-15 (2001-2002) the section entitled "My Favorite Things About Japan" included



the following questions: "What was your impression of Japan before you came and how did it change after you'd been here?" –And, "Since your arrival, is there any Japanese habit or custom that has surprised or puzzled you?" To the last question, many responded that they were impressed with the Japanese ability to maintain a precise schedule, a trait also reflected in the nearly perfect punctuality of the public transportation network. From 1962 to 2002, the topics of Japanese cleanliness, punctuality, and the apparent reserve of the Japanese people revisited JICA orientation material and newsletters.

### The Icon of Japanese Success - the Survival of Culture

An additional point of the OTCA orientation pamphlet from 1965 concerns "sight-seeing and indigenous culture":

Japan is a beautiful land. There are many places of great scenic beauty in different parts of the country offering a wide variety of views. Although the country has been rapidly modernized, the Japanese are also very concerned with preserving their indigenous traditional culture, including temples, shrines and other ancient forms of architecture as well as the living arts of painting, music, dance, drama and handicrafts. You will find these when you come to Japan. (OTCA, 1965: 20-23)

Two photographs illustrate Japanese culture. One is of a group of overseas participants in a sightseeing bus and another is of three African participants "visiting a farmer's house." In the 1967 edition, a photograph from a flower arrangement class replaced the visit to the farmer's house. (OTCA, 1967: 21)

The JICA newsletter distributed to the alumni of training programs features many articles about Japanese culture. Each issue of the JICA newsletter throughout the 40-year-period includes articles about technical topics as well as articles about one or more aspects of what is often referred to as traditional Japanese culture. These topics have included Mt. Fuji (*Kenshū-in*, 1973, no. 29: 18-24), bamboo (*Kenshū-in*, 1974, no. 31: 13-20), The Hanging Scroll (*Kenshū-in*, 1974, no. 32: 15-20) Japanese gardens (*Kenshū-in*, 1979, no. 43: 11-15), Favorite songs in Japan (*Kenshū-in*, 1985 – 1988, nos. 57-63), and *bonsai* (*JICA Network*, 2003, vol. 18: back cover).

All issues of the newsletter include letters-to-the-editor. Many of the letters include some reference to icons of Japanese culture such as flower arrangement, tea ceremony, sushi, and martial arts. *Kenshū-in* no. 31 from 1974 included three letters. The first letter was entitled "To Know a Country and its People" and was written by Aponso Jackson Nor from Sri Lanka. He wrote, "Despite [...] technological achievements [Japan] has preserved its oriental culture. In Japan, oriental culture blends harmoniously with technological development." (*Kenshū-in*, 1974, no. 31: 11) This letter emphasized the unexpected and very desirable achievement of Japan as opposed to other countries, which have gained many of the benefits of development to the detriment of their "traditional" culture.

The second letter, entitled "Very Polite, Friendly and Helpful People," written by Hernandy Melissa Prudente from the Philippines included the following passages:

We have heard enough, I think, of foreigners' stories about the peculiarities about the Japanese way of life, such as *tatami*, common baths, *Ikebana*, *sashimi* and the like and I will not dwell on these points. But I cannot help but express admiration for the Japanese people who have, in the record time of three decades, emerged from the devastation of the Second World War to become one of the richest nations in this world and yet at the same time, retain their typical Japanese national character. (*Kenshū-in*, 1974, no.31: 11)

Prudente avoided defining "typical Japanese national character," but dwelled – eloquently – on some aspects of Japanese culture.

Needless to say, I shall always remember my visit to Japan the friends I have made, and the places I have been to: Nikko, with its rich colors, paintings, sculptures, and the stately grandeur of the cedar trees; Kyoto, with the countless temples and shrines that is a reminder of the Japan of long ago; the castles of the feudal lords, the steel armor of the samurais; and many, many hues, tints, rhythms sights, sounds, the times and places of which are not important because they are anywhere and everywhere in Japan: regal ladies in their bright silk kimonos, the purposeful drums of the Summer Bon Odori festivals, the narrow stone paths of shrines, the tempting smells of the noodle shops, the rumble that one hears as he stands on the station platform and awaits the approaching densha; the thick crowds in Tokyo; the list is endless. If one is in search of beauty and technology in coexistence, the place is Japan, [...]. (*Kenshū-in*, 1974, no.31: 11-12)

Prudente's list is long and includes many of the images mentioned again and again in all the issues of the newsletter. Reminiscent of the 1965 orientation material quoted above, both Nor and Prudente mention the successful way in which Japan as a country has combined old and new.

In the new millennium, the same icons of Japanese "traditional culture" still survive. In March 2001 in volume 11, Ingrid Lovric from Croatia wrote, "I really enjoyed the article 'Harmony of the Universe.' Ikebana [flower arrangement] is a beautiful Japanese art, like calligraphy and bonsai." (*JICA Network*, 2001, vol. 11: 31) In volume 15 from March 2002, S.M. Parakrama Abeykoon, Sri Lanka, wrote, "Marvelous articles appeared in this issue [14] regarding the tourism industry, including ecotourism. Also, I'm very interested in Japanese traditions, like Nanbu Tekki teapots, Ki[y]omizudera Temple, Kyoto. They rekindled sweet memories of my stay in Japan." (*JICA Network*, 2002, vol. 15: 31)

Since 1994, many of the JICA alumni organizations have launched websites, which include discussions of Japanese culture as well as specific links to Japanese cultural sites. For example, the site of the JICA Alumni of Singapore includes links to the Japanese Cultural



Society and the Japanese Information Network. The activities calendar includes visits to Japanese restaurants. A separate search engine also enables the visitor to access Japanese popular songs [*enka*]. (*JICA Alumni Singapore*, 2004) The site of the Alumni of Pakistan has a more distinct separation of Japanese lifestyle and “Culture” along the lines of the original Iranian perceptions. Among upcoming events are the *Bon odori* festival at the Japanese school in Islamabad and a Japanese song contest. The site also includes a rather elaborate entry on customs, culture, and etiquette in Japan. This entry explains the customs of bowing, greetings, business cards, the Japanese bath, and other dos and don’ts. Mention of public baths in Japan is used as the focal point both for a discussion of the potential for cultural clashes arising from different standards of cleanliness, and as an example of an iconic issue inherent in Japanese culture and with roots in traditional Japanese religious practices. (*JICA Alumni Association of Pakistan*, 2004)

#### Why Culture?

The objective of this article was to examine presentations of Japanese culture as part of course programs to support development. Why this preoccupation with Japanese culture, when the course participants are in Japan to study modern development and technology? Two reasons seem constant from the initial evaluation responses in 1962 to the alumni websites of 2004. One, is a view of culture as the potential for clashes between overseas participants and their Japanese hosts. The other is a view of national indigenous culture as antonym to development.

Iranian respondents to a questionnaire prepared by OTCA in 1962 initiated the process of negotiating the inclusion of culture in the programs and of making this a budget item for OTCA and later JICA. Orientation materials, newsletters, and websites in combination with surveys and evaluations have all contributed to the process of negotiating the cultural image of Japan. They present Japanese culture as part of two strategies one to support the trainees in their everyday life in Japan and one to dispel notions of mutual exclusivity of indigenous culture and development.

Overseas participants and their Japanese hosts have chosen to interpret misunderstandings in the everyday life they share in Japan as clashes of culture. The absence of shared expectations and practices of time management, personal hygiene or interpersonal interaction have given rise to a compartmentalization of expectations attributed to so-called cultural differences. Orientation material sensitize overseas visitors to Japanese punctuality, cleanliness, and reserve in personal relations in order to avoid specific misunderstandings and causes of every day conflicts or clashes.

The preoccupation with Japanese culture, as icons of the survival of indigenous national culture lies in the concern shared by many developing countries that what they consider their own culture will vanish con-

currently with the attainment of development goals. The celebration of a distinct Japanese culture that co-exists with the technological dominance of Japan signals the potential for an inclusive *both* rather than an *either-or*. Comments from alumni in the 1990s still focus on their desire to emulate the Japanese combination of old and new in their own countries as one of their main interests in Japan. Every issue of the newsletters include articles on “Japanese Culture” as well as either articles or comments on different aspects of living in Japan. This continues in the vein of the Iranian proposal and the orientation material of the 1960s. The fact that the websites managed by individual alumni associations include references to “Japanese Culture” reflects a sustained interest in the host country that shows how “traditional culture” can survive the introduction of “the technological modern.”

In the post-Cold War world, UNESCO, the World Bank, UNDP, and bilateral donor agencies, such as Danida and JICA, have published reports on the importance of preserving and respecting indigenous cultures in the design of development interventions. The presentation of Japanese culture as icons of cultural survival predates these reports and pertains to host culture rather than indigenous cultures of developing countries. However, The JICA approach to integrating concepts of culture into courses for development has remained almost constant since 1962. JICA courses for overseas participants present Japanese culture in a development context as two parallel and at times overlapping images of clashes and icons.

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