

The Myth of “Japanese Culture”

By Mike Costanzo

In my four years of study at the University of Maryland, I not only gained much knowledge and information about Japanese language, history, and culture, but I also developed many assumptions about Japan and the Japanese people. These assumptions have all been challenged in the last few years, and while some have stood the test, others have fallen away. This essay is about one such fallen assumption, and reflects the most important lesson I have learned from my time in Japan.

The concept of “Japanese culture” is perhaps one of the most ambiguous, elusive, and misunderstood concepts encountered by the foreign student of Japan. It is commonly used to refer to a supposed set of concrete standards by which the Japanese people order their lives and direct their behavior, and is considered by many to be the key to effective interpersonal interaction and true cross-cultural understanding. However, a thorough and consistent examination of the matter reveals that “Japanese culture”, in the sense of a monolithic, universally accepted standard of behavior, simply does not exist.

Even those aspects of life in Japan that are considered to be universal, such as bowing, using chopsticks, and speaking Japanese, are far from standard in the reality of daily application. Some Japanese bow more or at different times than others; chopstick usage varies widely; and language usage differs based on such factors as geography, age, education, and temperament. Thus, if these most universal of things are not standard, one must conclude that there is never one “correct” standard of behavior in Japan that holds true in all cases and conditions. In other words, Japanese culture is not singular, but plural.

The truth is that there are many Japanese cultures. There are generational cultures—for example, older Japanese people are generally more polite and value decorum, while younger Japanese people are generally more informal and value the courage to be an individual. There are urban/rural cultures—city dwellers tend to be better educated and more technologically savvy, whereas country-dwellers tend to be more laid-back and relationally-oriented. There are religious cultures, political cultures, pop-cultures, historical cultures, educational cultures, class cultures, even small group/company cultures, and discerning the difference between them (and one’s own role within them) requires a great deal of time, patience, and wisdom.

But the most important step toward understanding the Japanese people is the belief that every Japanese person is a singular individual. Everyone has unique thoughts, tastes, and ideas, and is simultaneously a part of any number of different cultures, affected by them but distinct from them. The great tragedy of conceiving of the Japanese people as having only one monolithic

“culture” is that it leads to the assumption that all Japanese people behave in essentially the same way given the same circumstances. And this is an error that causes no end of misunderstandings, hurt feelings, and ineffective communication.

It is a tempting proposition to imagine that one can “understand” the Japanese people by learning and universally applying a small set of cultural externals. But it is never safe to assume that anyone’s behavior can be predicted based on their culture(s). After all, there is a difference between environment and personality, between circumstances and character, between values and practice, between externals and the heart. True understanding of the Japanese people (or any people) takes a lifetime to learn.

If we are to know how to conduct ourselves in Japanese society, we must become students. We must study our interactions carefully, noting similarities, and giving special consideration to differences, inconsistencies, and contradictions. Only then can one move beyond simplistic myths towards real cultural understanding.