Japan: Impressions from a Six-Day Visit

Domar BALMES
MA Student, Asian Center
University of the Philippines Diliman
dhibalmes@gmail.com

Together with four fellow Japan Studies majors at the Asian Center, University of the Philippines Diliman (UP Diliman), and our Japan Studies Program Coordinator, Dr. Jocelyn Celero, we visited Kyoto, Nara, and Osaka from 15 to 20 December 2019 as part of a six-day study tour sponsored by the Konosuke Matsushita Foundation. The study tour was themed, "Tradition and Modernity: A Study Tour for Understanding Japanese History, Language, and Culture."

Apart from allowing us to visit and experience selected cultural sites of the Kansai region, the trip also provided an avenue for us to experience how it feels to live and navigate Japan's bustling metropolitan and cultural areas. Moreover, the trip also gave us the opportunity to interact with Japanese students from a private university like Ryukoku University and with those specializing in the Filipino language from an imperial/state university like Osaka University–Minoh campus.

Prior to any academic study, my ideas and images of Japan mostly came from the NHK series, *Japan Video Topics* in the 1990s. Later on, more fantastic images were formed by my avid consumption of manga and animé, films shown at the annual *Eiga Sai* (now the Japanese Film Festival) in the Philippines, and English translations of modern and contemporary Japanese novels. Japan represents to me the best of Asia—a country of

novelty in terms of culture and technology, rich in history, and a society that feels oddly familiar and yet distant enough to remain a curiosity.

Truth be told, I am not one to romanticize too much. Japan, to me, is both filled with so much nostalgia and an exciting, foreboding sense of the future: this is what I felt during the train ride to Kyoto from Kansai International Airport. Looking out through the window, I saw old thatched-roof houses that appeared comfortable and content to exist side by side grey steel structures and concrete buildings.

This is my first visit to Japan—to Kyoto, Nara, and Osaka especially, places teeming with so much of Japanese culture, and it awakened a deep sense of amazement and respect for the people of this country and for how the past continues to persist alongside modernity and high-technology. Kyoto is a bustling hotspot of traditional culture accentuated by modernity. Osaka is a salad bowl of cultures and commerce; and Nara is Japan in a suspended state, caught between a surviving past and an inevitable future.

I saw few people in the Kyoto neighborhood of our *ryokan* (inn). The roads, as well as the many short and narrow streets, were uncongested. People waited at designated bus stops and walked along the walkways; there exists a strong sense of boundaries in public spaces. Whether inside the train station, subway, or commercial districts, the demarcation lines are always clear. I did not see an instance where these boundaries were transgressed—except by tourists or only under the cover of night. The predictability and reliability of Japan's public transport system increased my appreciation for its efficiency.

As the most senior Japan Studies major in the group, I looked out for signs and pieces of evidence that the essentialist school of *Nihonjinron* put forward to argue for the exceptionality of Japanese culture, tradition, language, and society. While it is true that I was able to see first-hand proofs of a vertical society, social conformity, and homogeneity, my interactions with Japanese students in the three workshops showed that *nihonjinron* is not the formidable and infallible theory that it appears to be.

At first, it was pretty tempting to affirm the claims of *nihonjinron* and fall into an essentialist perspective of Japan. But through active conversations with Japanese students, as well as with the President of the Konosuke Matsushita Foundation, Matsushita Masayuki, I understood that the monolithic conceptions about the country and its people can also be disproved by the Japanese themselves. For example, homogeneity and high conformism are being challenged by the changing attitudes of young Japanese who now voice their opinions on issues of diversity and inclusion in terms of gender and cultural fluency. Although these views are mostly said in the confines of the workplace and in the context of the tourism and hospitality industries, these voices can represent a new generation of Japanese who are more active in engaging foreign nationals.

Of course, I encountered Japanese who asked me whether I found their society "polite, orderly, and respectful." I find this active level of consciousness or concern about outsiders' perception of the Japanese quite intriguing. It was mostly adults, middle-aged men who asked me. None of the students whom we've interacted with did so.

Other observations include the extensive employment of senior citizens in the hospitality and service sectors, the flood of tourists from China and many Chinese-manned/owned businesses, and the limited use of English by the Japanese even among tourist destinations. This is despite the fact that these locations have been experiencing a surge of tourism for several years.

Through our tour of the Panasonic Museum, more than the technology and evolution of its products, I was able to learn a lot and appreciate the virtues of its founder, Konosuke Matsushita, also known as "The God of Management." He used his high level of national consciousness and social responsibility in order to make business and industry an active partner for national growth and development. Aside from this, the Panasonic Eco Technology Center (PETEC) serves as a very good model of how manufacturers and corporations, through government policies, can institutionalize sustainable business to the benefit of the environment and the community. PETEC is particularly unique because it is the only recycling center in Japan owned by a manufacturer.

One last item that I will always remember is the automatic, heated, touch-free toilet. This hallmark of Japanese technology and ingenuity reminded me of the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek's meditation on the ideology of toilets in Europe and the United States. Each toilet differed in design, thereby eliciting different attitudes about human excrement, which can be a metaphor for the social ills of the world. Could it be that the automatic, heated, touch-free toilets can be used to determine the present Japanese psyche? Living in the midst of so much convenience, high technology, and affluence, are the Japanese still able to perceive the ugly ills happening within and outside their society? If so, what could be their attitude toward social change?

In conclusion, Japan remains to be one of the places in the world that I would like to visit from time to time. I have yet to explore different regions, experience different activities, and interact with more Japanese by learning how to speak Nihongo. Lastly, Japan presents to me an image of a future that lies for the Philippines if it attains material affluence and social stability.

About the Author

Domar Balmes (dhibalmes@gmail.com) is pursuing his master's degree in Asian Studies, majoring in Japan at the Asian Center, University of the Philippines Diliman.

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