

A CANADIAN SOJOURNER IN JAPAN *

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"But the underlying strangeness of this world, – the psychological strangeness, – is much more startling than the visible and superficial."

(Lafcadio Hearn, Japan: An Interpretation, 1904)

A six-month immersion in Japanese society, by way of a visiting professorship to teach Canadian History at Nagoya City University, confirmed on an almost daily basis Hearn's brilliant observation. At first, one is struck by the visible yet diminishing differences in dress, comportment, customs, values, private and public institutions, political culture, the natural landscape, and the over-built environment. One quickly learns that the far more crucial difference resides in the incompatible imaginary countries – imagined and re-imagined by Japanese and foreigners over the past four centuries – which have prevented a true understanding of the "real" Japan", both past and present. These divergent imagined countries have forced Japanese and Westerners to cross and re-cross an imaginary bridge in their perpetual quest to understand and better appreciate themselves and each "other".

"Today the Japanese are re-creating themselves, making themselves anew. They now seek to alter the very thing that most people think sets the Japanese apart: the relationship between the individual and society."

(Patrick Smith, Japan: A Reinterpretation, 1997)

Despite the culture shock – much of which is rooted in this "imagined" Japan held up to the world and fostered by the West – visiting contemporary Japan is quite exhilarating and highly informative. Why? Because one becomes a privileged witness to a profound social revolution that is well underway. This revolution is far more profound than the one associated with Westernization during the Meiji restoration. This was a material revolution of smokestacks and steel, one which never seriously challenged the Japanese "spirit" or "essence" residing at the heart of traditional Japan. Today, a great many Japanese are in the process of jettisoning their non-existent imaginary country grounded in this pre-millennial "Japanese spirit". They are redefining themselves in ways that are far more tangible and realistic. They are putting the individual rather than the state at the core of their post-modern value

system, a shift that will shake a profoundly communal society to its very roots. No doubt, a re-invented, more autonomous, more confident, more realistic Japan will insist on playing a substantial role in our "globalizing world", especially in the modernization of China.

What does a Canadian learn from sojourning in Japan? A small minority of Japanese women are beginning to emerge from the "world of shadows" – where they enjoy a constrained, artificial happiness in a hidden corner – thanks to much better education and a fervent desire to live autonomous, self-fulfilling lives. While many barriers remain on the path to full emancipation, the process is all but irreversible. Crisis pervades

education at all levels, a prelude to fundamental reforms.

Too much dull, rote learning and bullying in the schools.

Far too few students at the university level – where getting in is more crucial than actual performance – thanks to a precipitous decline in the birth rate two decades ago.

Many educators are no longer satisfied with manufacturing Nihonjin, that is, conforming Japanese salarymen steeped

in the ethos of an urban Samurai class devoted to the corporation and the state. Despite serious obstacles, a few progressive educators are beginning to mould autonomous, free thinking individuals proficient in every branch of

arts, science, technology, medicine and the law. University administrators are scrambling to modernize their outmoded programs and teaching philosophies to attract scarce students!

In the workplace, members of the younger generation no longer accept the assigned role of salaryman as corporate warrior, a role entailing undying loyalty to the corporation at the expense of oneself and one's family. Karoshi – death by overwork – is on the decline. Japanese still work long hours but increasingly insist on having fulfilling private lives, hobbies, and many short vacations. Now that Japanese corporations are laying off thousands of workers, who were told they had jobs for life, the reciprocal loyalty holding the system in place is fast dissolving. Salarymen, loyal to themselves, are now free to change jobs in an increasingly



competitive market place. As more women enter the workforce pressures for change will be difficult to ignore.

During a lecture I gave at Yokkaichi University's School of Public Policy, I became aware that Japan's deeply-entrenched centralist political culture is being challenged by an academic and political movement. Its proponents are calling for extensive decentralization to the cities, not the prefectures, and to the "back" of Japan. That is, to the underdeveloped, under-populated, often snow-bound regions lying outside the Pacific "front" of Japan, the ugly concreted urban-industrial sprawl stretching from Tokyo all the way to Osaka and beyond. For this to happen, urbanized Japanese will have to abandon their idealized, romanticized conception of the "not Tokyo" regions of Japan as the repository of their authentic, uncorrupted customs, values, institutions, and the Japanese "spirit". They will have to stop paying enormous sums to have what little remains of rural Japan preserved as a sort of half-living museum of a long vanished past. The best example of this misplaced largesse is Meiji Mura Museum nestled in the mountains 90 minutes north of Nagoya. It is the repository of some 67 western style buildings – including the lobby and entrance of Frank Lloyd Wright's Imperial Hotel in Tokyo – constructed all over Japan during the Meiji restoration era. The artificial village is a great attraction for the gaijin seeking a quick glance into the past but totally out of place and not very helpful to the local economy.

It was fascinating to observe first hand the evolving role of the Imperial institution, referred to as the sacred "nothing", since the ascent of Emperor Akihito to the Chrysanthemum Throne in 1988. While on the grounds of the Imperial Palace, a vast piece of real estate in the very heart of Tokyo, we witnessed first hand the disappointment of the men and the rejoicing of the women to the announcement that the new "Imperial" baby, was a girl! Most Japanese students, I then discovered, were totally oblivious to Imperial family affairs, showed little concern for preserving the Imperial Institution, and were perplexed over Emperor Akihito's refusal to apologize for Japan's war crimes. No doubt, their apathy and desire to deal with Japan's checkered past will contribute to Japan's coming of age. Japan will achieve full maturation when its citizens put aside their invented image of "others within", the Koreans, the burakumin or outcasts of Osaka, the Ainu people of Hokkaido, and the Okinawans. Main Islanders were puzzled as to why a Canadian sojourner was interested in visiting Okinawa! Accepting diversity within will enable Japanese to accept the richness of true ethnic pluralism that comes with much-needed immigration. Even a brief stay is

enough to convince one that the road from sojourner to established immigrant remains long and tortuous since prejudices dissolve very slowly.

It was difficult to know whether the Japanese students and the colleagues, friends, and many acquaintances we encountered on our travels about the country learned anywhere nearly as much about Canada as this Canadian sojourner learned about the Japan and its people. The students were curious and eager to learn about all aspects of Canadian history which often lead to interesting and revealing insights into their own history. It was a marvelous experience that will not soon be forgotten. I wish to thank my colleagues and friends at NCU for the invitation. I encourage Canadianists to visit the "land of the rising sun" where all the trains run on time, the range of foods is extraordinary, the people are very polite and most helpful, and a commitment to, and recognition of, beauty and excellence in everything traditional, modern, and post-modern remains paramount.

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