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Person to Person in Japan

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11/5/19

Interview and Observations on Japan

I have had some experience of traveling in Japan, but that was only for a short time. This didn't really allow me to fully observe the traditions and habits of native Japanese. So, now that I have had time to really see everyday life here, I will choose a few things I noticed that were different. The first habit I noticed was how everyone always seems to pay attention to the person who is "above" them. For example, when talking with teachers and bosses everyone is expected to use humble language while continuing to raise up the more respected person. I have also noticed that many things are not really taken for granted, people respect those who are helping them and will always be gracious and humble about everything. There is this constant awareness for those who are around you, and most make an effort to be respectful and courteous to everyone. This is quite different from what I am used to in the US. There is some idea of respect for those above you, but it is not taken as seriously, and when it comes to strangers it really depends on the person. There is a big contrast between the US's individualist culture and Japan's culture of collectivism. While there are many pros and cons to collectivism, seeing it in action has made me feel more aware of those around me, and what kind of respect that I should give them. Discussing these ideas with my interviewee really helped me understand what situations different kinds of respect are needed, as well as when you can loosen up on the rules and become closer to this person in a more casual way.

There were quite a few things that I discussed with my interviewee about our cultural differences, but for the sake of being brief, I will choose two of them. I have always taken for granted the way that American politics is constantly publicized and discussed, on an almost daily basis. Even with the other Americans here it is easy to start a conversation about American politics. However, according to my friend, it is fairly taboo to talk about your political beliefs openly. Additionally, most college-aged people have

little clue as to what is actually going on in Japanese politics. When asked how certain topics are handled in Japan, most everyone has no idea that the things I ask about are actually issues in Japan, as well as the US. The next major difference we discussed was food. This may seem like kind of an unrelated topic, but the way Japan deals with food and cooking is very surprising to me. In the US everyone has a huge refrigerator, freezer, and the grocery stores are packed with the same kinds of food year-round. This is not the case in Japan, almost all the food cooked here is fresh and often bought the day it is prepared. So, long-term storage and freezing is not something that is common here. I thought this was really impressive, my interviewee also went on to explain that food prepared in Japan is held to an extremely high standard. The people who prepare food truly focus on the customer and their satisfaction, instead of cutting corners and trying to maximize profits like food in the US. Lastly, almost all foods have a season that you typically eat them in, because in the off-season there is no way to buy things that aren't being grown as they are not normally frozen. Compare this with the US, where we can buy apples all year because they are frozen or stockpiled for sale in the off-season. These two cultural ideas are really something that I find myself thinking about often. I wonder if the US is fortunate or not in how we typically deal with these two topics.

Getting the chance to really interview and ask someone these questions was really enjoyable. I talk with this friend daily, but we never have had any real structure to our conversations. So, being able to find answers to some of the questions that I have had for a while really helped me understand a lot more about Japanese culture and ideals. To be honest, this interview hasn't changed my perception of the US or Japan all that much. I know that both countries have many differences that I may not fully understand yet, and may never understand. Yet, gaining a deeper understanding of a different culture can really help put your own beliefs and ideas into perspective. I know that the US has its own issues, but so does Japan. My

main takeaway from this was to appreciate what we take for granted and try to better understand what we don't have.