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Acceptance of Foreigners in Japan: Languagcultre's Impact on the Foreign Experiance.

Abstract

With Japan's rapid increase in foreign population over the last decade, Japanese people are now for the first time faced with the problem of diversification, and this change has led to various attitudes toward these new foreigners, which can impact one's experience abroad in the country. This paper delves into the intricacies of the acceptance of foreigners in Japanese society and the various aspects that contribute to their ability to adapt within a new culture. From tourists to foreigners born and raised in Japan, this paper explores the different implications that can affect one's experiences with Japanese people and the culture. The concepts of "Nihonjinron," and what Japanese people consider "Japanese" versus foreign, play a pivotal role in the attitudes and treatment of foreigners in Japan. The question of whether linguistic and cultural knowledge can positively affect one's experience is then raised. But how knowledgeable in languagculture does one have to be in order to truly be accepted in Japanese society? How much do they have to adapt to belong? All of these factors play a role in foreigners' experiences in Japanese society.

Introduction

Over the past decades, Japan has grown to be one of the most modern and innovative countries in the world, presenting itself on a global scale and, in turn, opening its doors and creating an influx of foreigners within its society. For the first time in its long history, Japan is beginning to see a cultural shift when it comes to the people and the diversity amongst them. But does an increase in the foreign population mean that these people will be accepted within Japanese society? In a

country with very little ethnic and linguistic diversity, traveling to Japan as a foreigner creates a shocking yet informative experience for both foreigners and native Japanese people. Japan itself is known as a very homogenous and collective country, meaning that outsiders may not be met entirely with welcome arms. But does one's knowledge of the language impact those mindsets? Or even the cultural knowledge and behavior of foreigners? Does adapting to Japan's culture, in turn, mean that they can be accepted by Japanese people? Unfortunately, the result may not be as simple as it appears, and foreigners may have to come to terms with the intertwined ideologies of Japanese society. From foreigners living and working in Japan with little to no knowledge of the language to individuals born and raised in Japan, foreigners' experiences describe what it is like to be a foreigner in Japan and the implications that come with it, regardless of their language and cultural knowledge.

Increase of Foreigners

Within Japan's long history, the country itself has not seen such a tremendous number of foreigners come to live there. For almost three centuries, Japan had limited its contract with the rest of the world, isolating many of its people from foreigners. As a result, up until 1868, Japan never presented itself on a global scale. But nearing the end of the 20th century, Japanese media began to spread within the Western world and grow in immense popularity. "By 2011, however, this [had] begun to change. Japan, which has resolutely swept the presence of the phenotypically identical and therefore largely 'invisible' Korean and Chinese communities under the carpet in official discourse along with other minority communities, is slowly facing up to the reality of growing domestic multilingualism and visible diversity brought about by globalization-induced economic migration from other countries since the 1980s" (Gottlieb 2012, p.2). As this wave of incoming foreigners in Japan increased, it can be seen how Japan as a country was changing due

to globalization with the influx of diverse cultures spreading within their society and how native Japanese people react to these changing times, particularly considering what makes someone "Japanese" and their own identities tied to their culture. "Discourses of national identity, in reality, are not set in stone: rather, they are redrawn and reconstructed, albeit slowly, as circumstances change" (Gottlieb, 2012, p.3). As the number of foreigners living in Japan continued to grow, "the monoethnic concept of Japanese identity based on blood line [was] thus being redrawn to allow the possible inclusion of a 'different' Japanese identity based instead on belonging" (Gottlieb, 2012, p.4).

Nihonjinron and Japan's Homogeneous Society

Before delving into the implications of foreigners' experiences in Japan, it is important to acknowledge the aspects of Japan's society that create these resulting mentalities and attitudes toward foreigners. The concept of "Nihonjinron" is the idea of "Japaneseness," and the idea that in order for someone to be considered truly "Japanese," they must be nationally, ethnically, and culturally Japanese. They must possess Japanese nationality, belong to the biologically characterized racial group, those of the "Yamato race/Japanese biological pedigree with yellow skin, black eyes, and black, straight hair" (Sugimoto, 1999, p.82), and they must be within the culturally defined ethnic group, "Japanese people of the Yamato race as the only authentic producers and consumers ("owners") of Japanese culture" (Sugimoto, 1999, p.82). And this idea of "Nihonjinron advocates share the fundamental assumption that Japaneseness, which every single Japanese supposedly possess, has existed indefinitely, that Japaneseness differs fundamentally from 'westerness,' namely western orientations, and determines all aspects of Japanese ways of life" (Sugimoto p.82). Thus, the mentality of characterizing people as "Japanese" and "not Japanese" not only creates a divide between Japanese people and foreigners,

but it also makes it impossible for a foreigner, even those of Japanese descent, to meet these requirements of “Japaneseness.” The nationality, ethnicity, and cultural “equation masks not only ethnic minority issues in Japan but also its intranational, non-ethnic variations and conflicts” (Sugimoto, 1999, p.83). This “genetic or biological view of Japanese identity sees race, language, culture, and citizenship as synonymous” (Burgess, 2012, p.41), and as a result, Japanese locals at times actually become defensive of their culture and do not welcome foreigners within it. Within Japan, there is the belief that foreigners should not properly be expected to understand Japanese, and that “the Japanese language is for the Japanese only.” When looking into various cases, “a number of examples of Japanese unnerved by foreigners who speak Japanese ‘too well.’ Those non-Japanese residents interviewed for the articles speculated that these feelings of aversion are related to the idea that the Japanese language is for the Japanese only, a kind of ‘defensive superiority’ that sees people feel threatened when distinctions become blurred and their ‘unique’ identity is challenged,” and “while most Japanese are sympathetic with the communication efforts of foreigners who speak Japanese only haltingly,” …“some are nonplussed by foreigners who speak like a native” (Burgess, 2012, p.38-39). With these ideologies and mentalities that exist in Japanese society in mind, we can begin to look at the various situations and scenarios of foreigners in Japan and the wide range of experiences between Japanese people and the foreigners who live there.

Working in Japan

One of the main drivers of the increasing foreign population in Japan is job opportunities. “Although foreigners make up a small portion of Japan's total workforce, their numbers have been surging in recent years." “Japan has 1.3 million foreign workers and a population of 127 million” (Obe 2018). As a result, this has brought both linguistically knowledgeable workers and

those who have never studied the Japanese language. This growth of foreign workers led to the “Gaijin” stereotype within the Japanese workplace. “Gaijin” literally means “foreigner” or "outsider,” and it pertains to English-speaking Caucasians from Europe or America, stereotypically presumed to be outspoken, culturally clueless, lacking proper deference and unable to use Japanese correctly (Moody, 2014, p.77). Japanese companies value these English-speaking employees because, by having an English speaker, they have access to the linguistic capital of English. “Internationalization brings many changing demands to individual workplaces as advances in technology and communication blur boundaries between local and global, increase contact between languages and cultures, and create diverse, multilingual environments” (Moody, 2014, p.75). In fact, “international executives ranked the ability to manage cross-cultural communication as the most important quality of successful workers, implying that workers in today’s multinational corporations must have the ability to connect to other societies, cultures, and people” (Moody, 2014, p.75). But these positions came with humor and mockery. In a specific case, “an American intern and his co-workers in a Japanese company use English and humor to discursively construct the intern’s outsider identity and how these interactions may interface with macro-level stereotypes to achieve positive effects through joking and lightheartedness, all while simultaneously accomplishing work-related goals.” (Moody 2014, p.76) Although there is not direct, fluent communication, the intern is able to understand his co-workers despite the language barrier, but it is also because of that language barrier and lack of linguistic and cultural understanding that there is a wall between him and his fellow coworkers. “It is not the fact that he is gaijin, but rather how he discursively presents himself as gaijin that achieves his goals.” (Moody, 2014, p.85). Even though the intern himself is a part of the company, there is a level of disconnection, and because he must present himself as “gaijin”

rather than an equal, he lowers himself to rely on humor and mockery amongst his peers. Within the case, the intern does speak some elementary Japanese, but his fluency and understanding leave him within the “gaijin” state of being an “outsider” from the rest of his coworkers.

Living in Japan

To understand these experiences through the eyes of a foreigner, in an interview with Yoonbin Cho, she shares her experiences as a Korean foreigner who studied and worked in Japan and now lives in Switzerland. She talks about her individual experience and her journey of how she got to Japan, her integration with the Japanese language, as well as the culture of Japanese people, mentioning both her experience with native Japanese people and her relationships with other foreigners also living in Japan. Yoonbin Cho is a Korean who, instead of waiting a year to continue at a Korean university, decided to go to school in Japan and later went on to work there. Yoonbin said how she had taken an interest in Japanese growing up, being exposed to it in small instances, such as anime or announcements, and was drawn to it due to its similarities to the Korean language. That, along with her knowledge of English, influenced her decision to study in Japan and later work there full time. When asked about her experiences as a student, Yoonbin goes on about her social life as a foreigner, as well as in and on campus with other students. She says, “As a student, before working in Japan, I really loved my life as a student, and also living as a foreigner in Japan was fun because there were always lots of things happening.” She continues to say that, “In Japan, I didn’t make many Japanese friends, and I always ended up making foreigner friends. So my friends that I met in Japan are also foreigners, and we share experiences and similar backgrounds who are willing to study in Japan.” When further asked about why this would be the case, Yoonbin replied, “It always ended up like that. Even when I worked, I made a lot of foreigner colleagues and friends. I think it was very hard to be integrated

into the society. But I actually realized it's always like that, regardless of which country you go in. To make local friends, you have to make extra effort to do that. So I have also experience living in Germany and Switzerland, and it's easier for me to make foreigner friends who live there than local friends because they already have their own circles and friends. And I think that, as a foreigner who's living in the country, it's hard to be in that circle." As Yoonbin describes, many foreigners struggle to make deep friendships and connections in Japan due to the circles of people, but in her case, it is not specific to Japan, regardless of preconceived notions of foreigners. Thus, regardless of which country it is, it makes it more difficult for foreigners coming to live in the country to make a real place for themselves amongst native residents, creating a barrier between the foreign population and natives that is extremely difficult to cross.

When asked about how Japanese people would react to people of different ethnicities or races, Yoonbin replied, "I also have some bad experiences, like those people who really explicitly expressed that to me, that I don't like you, which can happen in any country. But I mean, Japanese people, you know I don't want to generalize it, but many people, they don't express it very directly, so when you are talking to them, they are actually very simile and kind, so you cannot really know if they hate you." … "I always felt a little bit of distance." We then asked, as someone who is of Asian ethnicity, if she had ever experienced a moment of realization from native Japanese people and thus faced different treatment as a result, to which Yoonbin replied, "[They] could easily tell I'm not from Japan. That's when I would also experience those bad comments or a little bit of racism comments. When I was doing a part-time job, for example, but I never used this to generalize other Japanese people because I think those are really a small number of people, and I didn't want to make that as a reason to hate the whole country. There are always weird people." When it came to different racial treatment, Yoonbin explained, from the

perspective of her German husband, that “they say that Japanese people are more friendly toward white people in general. I think that’s not just Japan, but in east Asia, there are people who [have] respect more toward white people.”... “One view is they are very afraid of talking to foreigners, while the other view is when they do very small little things, they tend to get very excited or impressed. I never experienced that.” This mentality is reflected in the idea of Nihonjinron, connecting to different treatment based on things such as physical appearance, playing into their view of a person, and thus their reaction toward a foreigner who is ethnically different, regardless of language skill. When asked to summarize her experience living and working in Japan and how that impact changed her as a person, Yoobin says that “by going to Japan, that, a little bit, differentiated my life experience because I was living in Japan as a foreigner. That way, I think that I have [a] more diverse experience”... “That broadened my view of how I look at the world, because, as I said, for example, I got racism comments, and maybe that could end up making my whole experience in a really negative way; I could end up just hating the whole experience in Japan or something like that, but by traveling… I learned that there are a small percentage of people who comment. You can just ignore that, and if you make an effort to meet [the] right type of people, no matter where you go, I think you can [have a] good experience.”

Born and Raised in Japan as Foreigner

In many of the cases involving foreigners, people move to Japan with the intent to live, either with prior knowledge of the language and culture or none at all. But what of the case of foreigners who are born and raised in Japan? If their main language is Japanese and they have spent their entire lives living in Japan and being a part of their culture, what differentiates their differences from other foreigners? In an interview, Max Capo spoke with Jazmine Sachiko Ross,

a girl who “was born and raised in Ishikawa prefecture, Japan, and despite having both English parents, she only went to Japanese public schooling her entire life” (Capo, 2022). Jazmine describes herself as “Nihonjin (Japanese) in every way except her appearance.” But when asked about Japanese people’s thoughts, the answer was more complicated, and she explained, “Depending on the person, they’ll say, ‘Oh, this girl’s Japanese’ or ‘She is a foreigner.’ I’ll just go with what they say,” and she continues to say, “I can’t deny that I’m mostly Japanese at heart.” Despite being Japanese both nationally and culturally, many people around her still viewed her as a foreigner, despite living in Japan her whole life. She explains how in her household she spoke English, but outside in her everyday life and school she spoke only Japanese and even said, “I am more confident in Japanese.” Regardless, many of her teachers believed she could not master the Japanese language and encouraged her to speak Japanese at home as well, which her parents refused. It was due to his lack of faith that Jazmine went to not be at the top of her classical Japanese class, saying her teachers would say, “Ross doesn’t even speak Japanese at home. She’s at a disadvantage compared to you all. So why is Ross better than everyone at Kokugo?” (Japanese) Jazmine’s situation truly highlights how, regardless of her Japanese ability and lifelong exposure to Japanese culture, there are many who still do not consider her “Japanese” because of her European heritage. So this truly raises the question: is it even possible to be fully accepted within Japanese society? If someone who grew up speaking the Japanese language natively and was raised in the culture still is not accepted, then is it possible to be?

Attitudes Toward Foreigners

The interactions and experiences foreigners have in Japan vary vastly, so to get a broader look overall, Jesse Ogundiran interviewed multiple foreigners living in Tokyo and got their opinions

of Japan and their experiences living there. Starting off, many discussed the issue of making friends, saying, “It's very difficult to make friends in Japan. To have very deep contact. I think Japanese are a bit lonely [of] people. They don't want to have much contact with somebody,” and another individual said similarly, “To be honest, it’s a bit lonely. It’s not like I can’t make friends or anything, but with locals, it’s hard to become friends with them because I don’t get cultural references that they do. I didn’t grow up here. I don’t have any roots here. And I can’t even use the 'oh, I’m a foreigner’ pass. (The speaker is ethnically Japanese). I’m not a ‘foreigner’ in their eyes. I’m kind of being outcast in a way” (JESSEOGN, 2022). Being ethnically Japanese, regardless, still posted an issue because of the cultural and national aspects missing from the ideologies many think of when thinking “Japanese,” but those who don’t speak the language said it was even harder for them in many aspects, saying, “I’d like to find a job when I don’t have anything to do. It’s kind of hard because I can’t really speak the language very well. And so when they tend to speak very fast, I get really confused. I don’t think I’ll ever find a job.” Another expressed issue was finding housing: “There were a lot of times where landlords would outright say ‘no foreigners.’ I would ask my realtor, ‘Oh no, I’ll pay extra’ and yeah, they be like, ‘dame.’ (No) It took me up to 6 months. They find out we’re not Japanese, and then they'd be like, ‘next’” (JESSEOGN, 2022). Not only is there a social barrier amongst individuals coming to live in Japan, but many said the language barrier does cause problems when trying to adjust and be accepted. Something as important as finding a job and places to live are crucial to a good lifestyle; thus, without linguistic knowledge, the struggle is even worse.

Linguistic Impact on Cultural Acceptance

With the narrowed ideologies and various experiences expressing the challenges that foreigners face in Japanese society, is it true that even with languaculture skills and knowledge, foreigners

are still treated differently? And how has this affected foreigners' attitudes toward Japan? In a study looking at the attitudinal factors in foreigners' adjustment in Japan, there were some notable changes as the length of their stay increased. The study began by stating, "Japan is a relatively homogenous and tight society." … "The problem with cultural identity seems to linger as a continuing issue for Japanese returnee children and Japanese returnees' ambivalence about their 'un-Japanese' changes" (Hsiao-Ying, 1995, p.524). The data was collected from 321 foreign residents from 44 countries living in the Kansai area of Japan. The participants' ages ranged from 17 to 66. (Hsiao-Ying, 1995, p.525).

TABLE 1
Scales and Items

Scale	n	*Cronbach's Alpha*	*Sample Items*
Attitudes Toward Japan	28	.89	I think that Japan is a culturally rich country. I am eager to know more about Japanese culture and society. I enjoy very much socializing with my Japanese acquaintances.
Nativism	23	.89	Relatively speaking, I feel that I am more friendly than most Japanese people. I think that Japanese people have much to learn from my country. I think that people in my country have many positive characteristics that are rarely found in Japanese.
Host Culture as a Model	16	.81	I think that Japan is a country of freedom. If I had children in Japan I would not mind if they went to a Japanese school. I think that Japan could serve as a developing model to other countries.
Alienation	17	.78	I think that it is impossible for a non-Japanese to adapt to life in Japan. There are times when I wish I did not come to Japan. I think that living in Japan as a foreigner is like living on an isolated island.

(Hsiao-Ying, 1995, p.527).

Table 1 shows the scales of what individuals are being measured on: n being the number of people, and Cronbach's alpha being a score from 0 to 1 in rating. One important note made was

how “the Alienation factor contained questions concerning the relation of the sojourner to the host culture; answers to those questions expressed their feelings of being powerless, living a meaningless or normless life, and feelings of self and social estrangement as well as social isolation in Japan” (Hsiao-Ying, 1995, p.527).

TABLE 2
Mean Scores of Respondents Classified by Six Time Periods

	Period in Months						
	1-6	*7-12*	*13-24*	*25-36*	*37-60*	*61 and up*	F *(rows)*
n	74	62	49	50	48	34	
Attitude Toward Japan	70.5_a	65.2_b	62.9_b	62.8_b	62.6_b	63.5_b	6.99**
Nativism	45.4_a	45.2_a	44.7	40.9_b	41.9	44.1	3.35**
Model/Function	35.7_a	34.7	34.2	32.0_b	34.3	34.8	2.28*
Alienation	27.0_a	25.4	26.7	24.8_b	24.8_b	26.4	2.01

NOTE: Row means with different subscripts are significantly (.05) different.
*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

(Hsiao-Ying, 1995, p.529).

Table 2 shows the various attitudinal factors and how, over time, their scores continued to lower during their stays in Japan. These scores are then further broken down into whether those respondents are students or not.

TABLE 5
Mean Scores of Student and Nonstudent Respondents Classified by Time Period

	Period in Years			
	< 1	*1-3*	*> 3*	F *(rows)*
Attitude Toward Japan				
Students	$66.40_{a,1}$	$61.00_{b,1}$	62.80	5.86**
Nonstudents	$71.10_{a,2}$	$66.10_{b,2}$	63.10_{b}	9.15**
F (columns)	8.26**	7.63**	< 1.00	
Nativism				
Students	44.40	42.40	41.90	2.21
Nonstudents	46.60	43.10	43.70	2.33
F (columns)	2.90	< 1.00	< 1.00	
Model/Function				
Students	34.80	33.80	35.70	1.52
Nonstudents	35.60	32.10	33.30	2.91
F (columns)	< 1.00	1.55	3.71	
Alienation				
Students	25.30_{1}	24.50_{1}	24.30_{1}	< 1.00
Nonstudents	27.80_{2}	27.70_{2}	26.60_{2}	< 1.00
F (columns)	8.10**	8.72**	4.65*	

NOTE: Row means with different alphabetical subscripts are significantly ($p < .05$) different. Column means with different numerical subscripts are significantly ($p < .05$) different.
*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

(Hsiao-Ying, 1995, p.532).

Here in the model, "in both cases, those in non-student groups were better adjusted than their student counterparts." … "Both groups' honeymoon phases collapsed, and attitudes toward Japan deteriorated significantly afterward" (Hsiao-Ying, 1995, p.532). Additionally, when looking into Japanese language ability, the study found that "when respondents were classified into a group of 171 persons with some Japanese-language familiarity and a group of 150 persons with little or no language familiarity, no evidence was found that language skill led to improved attitudes" (Hsiao-Ying, 1995, p.532). Although many individuals express how their language skills are a helpful tool that can be used for their own adjustment, their language skills do not have a notable impact on local attitudes towards foreigners. This is reflected in the reactions to foreigners use of the Japanese language, saying that "the better you get at the language, the less credit you are given for your accomplishments; the more fluently you speak it, the less your

hardwon skills will do for you in the way of making friends and impressing people. But by the same token . . . the less you can do with the language, the more you will be praised and encouraged by Japanese society in general and by your Japanese friends in particular." (Burgess, 2012, p.38) and furthered by describing how "the greater the students' language abilities, the more likely they were to hold a negative image of the Japanese, choosing such modifiers as 'cold,' 'unfriendly,' and 'prejudiced' to describe them" (Burgess, 2012, p.39)

This study concludes by explaining how "the results and implications of [the] research contradict the easy solutions put forward by the theory of mere 'cultural learning.' The emotional value of social interaction and the attitudes attached to it are not determined solely by skills as easily acquired as language and superficially conforming to everyday life" (Hsiao-Ying, 1995, p.534). Thus, foreigner acceptance cannot be fully acquitted to language and culture knowledge, and Burgess describes the "'invisible barrier to intimacy' which sees Japanese strive to maintain distance from foreign 'guests,' even as the 'guests' seek greater acceptance. The Japanese concept of internationalization (kokusaika), does not include the idea of welcoming foreigners into Japan to live and work in society" (Burgess, 2012, p.39). This alienation and division created amongst the locals and natives is thus reflected in the attitudes aimed toward foreigners residing in Japan. "Japanese tend to give foreigners the red-carpet treatment; unfortunately, this often leads to 'discrimination.' For long-term foreign residents, red-carpet treatment could just make them feel that they are guests in Japanese society and that they are not able to become natives" (Hsiao-Ying, 1995, p.534). Although it may seem that improving one's Japanese language skills and becoming knowledgeable of the culture would be advantageous to a foreigner's experience and ability to be accepted, it is not that simple. The mentalities and ideologies intertwined within Japanese society, due to its long history of isolation and

homogeneity, have created a large division between the growing diverse communities within Japan that is not easy to erase.

Future and Growth of Diversity

Despite the discouraging notion that language skills and practice of culture do not have a notable impact on foreigners' acceptance in Japan, that does not mean that it will remain that way. As the county's foreign population continues to grow, so does its linguistic and cultural diversity. As of 2023, Japan's foreign population has grown to a record high of over 3.2 million (The Japan Times, 2023), opening Japan's doors further and creating a new cultural wave that could not only impact local attitudes toward the foreigners resting there but also potentially lessen the ideologies created in their history. Languaculture knowledge may not be a significant contributing factor to influencing Japanese people's attitudes towards foreigners, it can help with the adjustment and ability to connect with people both linguistically and culturally, and over time, Japan has the potential to continue to change, become a more diverse society, become more open to foreigners living there, and, in turn, change their conception of what makes someone truly "Japanese," regardless of nationality, ethnicity, or culture.

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