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An Opportunity to Hear from a Japanese National

I had the opportunity to interview an older friend who I’d met on a social app. Emiyo is a Japanese woman who was born among the Lost generation of Japan, who is rich in testimony of the cultural differences between the East and West. Since she has experience living in both the US and Japan, she was the perfect person to interview. While she did not feel too comfortable going into much detail as far as her own life story, I believe that her answers to the questions I posed fills the gaps, as her answers depend entirely on her experiences as a Nihonjin (Japanese person). My questions seem a little too academic for an interview, but because she has always spoken in an intellectual manner for as long as I can remember, I found it easier and more effective to ask like this.

Her life story in the briefest form can be described in this manner: Emiyo was born in the US to Japanese national parents, her father being on assignment in the States at the time. She went to primary school in the US, then moved to Japan for middle school and high school. For post-secondary education, Emiyo went to the US for her first few years of university, then finished in Japan at Keio University. After graduation, she started working at her current job.

I asked for examples of any clear-cut differences between Japanese and American youth in their aspirations and goals. According to Emiyo, in order to explain the difference in youth, we must examine whether a country is a new- or old-world country. Most countries are old-world, Emiyo said, which means that they’ve established class systems centuries/millennia ago, enforcing the idea that people “know their place” in society at a glance. However, in America, classism was “stamped out by American propaganda” starting in World War I up until now. She declared that, as a result, Americans do not know what classism is, at least compared to other countries, which results in the greatest vertical mobility potential she has ever seen in a country and is, in her opinion, the closest thing to meritocracy. Americans can thus dream big, because in their eyes, there is no limit to as far as they can go. She used to live with international students from all over the world. When presented with a choice, an American would say “Just do it! It’s easy!” while someone on the other side of the world would say “It’s not possible.” The funny thing is, according to Emiyo, both would be right in their respective societies and cultures.

Japanese youth, on the other hand, are in a society that holds different values and an incredibly rigid class stratification. You can have money, but “if you don’t have the prestige,” then “you’re still nothing.” This idea, plus the daunting future they know that is ahead of them, encourages many youths to seek out alternative lifestyles. This reminded me of the article “Unable to conform, unwilling to rebel? Youth, culture, and motivation in globalizing Japan.” by Toivonen et al., where the intense and overbearing working culture that saturates all those who choose to identify as Conformists is sometimes sought to be avoided (Toivonen et al. 4). Instead, the Innovators, like Emiyo is talking about, want to pursue success via less “legitimate” means. Emiyo exemplifies internet fame and living off YouTube revenue as their method of work, simply because they’ve seen it done in the west. Other times, Emiyo explains, people choose to live humbly: perhaps in a quiet, small town community with a simple job. This reminds me of the documentary “Living for Free in the Mountains of Japan?” where a group of NEETS choose to live a very simple life in isolation doing odd jobs, such as growing sunflowers. In the video, they looked incredibly happy and content with this lifestyle, so I can attempt to understand the appeal. In the piece by Toivonen et al., I make the connection that these are the so-called “quiet mavericks” of Japan. They are isolated and do not dream big, however they make the most of their life using unconventional means. She says that many of the Lost Generation actually influenced the quiet, simple, small town dream that today’s youth in turn found. She then makes the bold statement that “in sharp contrast to the older generation who believed that hard work is above all… [for those of the Lost Generation], there is no reward for doing so and so it lost its value.” Again, this is similar to the Ritualists mentioned by Toivonen et al.

The topic turned to what working in Japan is like. Here she told me that working in Japan is highly draining. There have been a number of cases where she would be taking the train to work, and it would be delayed because someone committed suicide. It became so common that people became more and more numb to these deaths, and they would mutter things like, “Why would you commit suicide today of all days? Now I’m going to be late for work!” This is a testimony to Ozawa-de Silva’s "Too Lonely to Die Alone: Internet Suicide Pacts and Existential Suffering in Japan,” where she says that Japan is a “suicide nation” and suicide prevention is not terribly common. Typically, people work 12- to 14-hour shifts, go home and sleep, and then go back to work. Sometimes, she says, they just sleep at work, which is usually praised because it means that they are working exceptionally hard. It’s possible that since work is the only thing salarymen know, there is an extraordinary feeling of loneliness, which Ozawa-de Silva mentions is one of the reasons why many Japanese commit suicide (Ozawa-de Silva 538).

Japan is trying to lessen the overwork deaths, so many buzzwords are popping up in Japanese businesses, such as “work-life balance,” which basically means they want to allow more time off and to leave work earlier. However, work culture is mainly driven by peer pressure and not controlled by administration, so it all becomes “lip-service” and nothing gets changed. Since people are expected not to stick out or cause a fuss, no one can have an outlet to vent their frustrations. According to Emiyo, it’s hard for anyone to understand unless they’ve experienced it. She gave the analogy that it’s like a mosquito bite: one bite once isn’t so bad, but when you get one once every hour without a break, only then will it start to consume you.

When asked how competitive the Japanese are in school even though cultural psychological studies on motivational differences (Kitayama et al.,1997; Heineetal.,1999; Morlingetal.,2002) suggest that Japanese society forms an “interdependent cultural system”, she said that all of that is “lip service.” She said that she has experienced a situation where if you say something is bad, they’ll respond with “Oh yeah it’s so horrible!” But if you say the very same thing is good, then they’ll say “Yes! I love it!” In her words, the system of interdependency lies on “any chance [Japanese people] get to look good, they’ll take it.” In the Hendry piece, “Socialization and Classification” in *Understanding Japanese Society*, Japan is characterized by their adoption of “Tatemae and Honne.” Tatemae is public behavior, while Honne is the true feelings of an individual (Hendry 44). Emiyo explained this concept to me before, saying that the two behaviors are similar to masks. There are two faces that you can show, one being fake and the other being a face that can only be shown to their inner circle (mostly their family).

In Japan, school is very competitive, since for most students, school is the only way to move up the prestige ladder. However, most of the prestige comes from which university you graduate from. If you graduate from Tokyo University, for example, then you’re set for life and will not be searching hard for any job. This was certainly true for almost all university graduates in 2018, where a “record-high 98.0 percent of newly minted university graduates in Japan have landed jobs at the beginning of this fiscal year in April,” which reflected Japan’s “recovering economy.” Of course, based on numerous articles, we can infer that these jobs are less than ideal due to the temporary nature of Japanese jobs, which puts a dent in the hopefulness of that statement.

This project really opened my eyes to the polarities of western versus Japanese culture. It made me realize that, as an outsider, I must be very careful when making observations – ensuring that I do not see with western eyes, but rather with a Japanese lens, though talking with Emiyo made me learn that the only way to truly know what the Japanese go through is by being Japanese.

References:

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Reflection on the project:

I started this project with lots of excitement to talk to my friend from Japan again, knowing she would provide so much insight, as she used to talk a lot about her disappointment in Japan’s current state, most likely because she was one of the victims among the Lost Generation. At first, she said she felt like she doesn’t have the same drive as before, but she gave me so much detail, with so much of the same passion I had previously seen. I was hoping for a chance to call her to try to get a sense of her tone, since that is basically impossible to do in a text conversation, but I really did enjoy this experience. I wish I could write more than the 4-page limit, but maybe I’ll save it for another day.

Questions (I asked all of them except for number 7, but only a few can be mentioned due to the page limit):

1. What did you mean when you said that you’re just “tired now”? Can you explain the causes of you losing your energy?
2. Can you explain any clear-cut differences in Japanese versus American youth in how ambitious they can be?
3. I’ve heard that Japanese society has the trait of being an “interdependent cultural system.” Does that seem accurate? I know that school is competitive, so does that not apply?
4. Do you have any thoughts on the “lost generation”? Do you think there are any contrasting mindsets between those of the lost generation and those who do not belong to it?
5. Does there seem to be more importance in raising a family or in working? Do you worry about the unhealthy Japanese population pyramid?
6. What can you say about classism in middle or high school?
7. If possible, can you talk about your experience living in Japan as a Japanese person who was born in the US?