

# Japan as the Far West



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By

John A.F. Hopkins

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*For Kaori*



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter One.....	1
Introduction: Asia and the West	
<b>Japan and Asia</b>	
<i>The Asia that Japan set aside</i>	
<i>Self-modernising: “Out with Asia, in with Europe”</i>	
<b>“The West” and “the East”</b>	
<i>The Enlightenment as a peculiarly Western cultural shift</i>	
<i>Greek philosophy, Drama, Christianity, and Zen</i>	
<b>Sports/Games</b>	
<i>“The Best from the West”</i>	
<b>What is Asian about Japan?</b>	
<i>The Japanese Writing System and Chinese/Korean influence</i>	
<i>Architecture and City Planning</i>	
<i>Domestic Architecture</i>	
<b>Japan and the Novel Coronavirus</b>	
<i>Cleanliness, Personal and Social</i>	
<b>Post-WW II Economic Revival</b>	
<i>“Great Makers of Things”</i>	
<i>Exports</i>	
<i>Technology</i>	
<i>Musical Instruments and Automobiles</i>	
Chapter Two.....	25
Education/Culture/the Arts	
<b>Education</b>	
<b>Literacy: books, magazines, the media</b>	
<b>Literature</b>	
<i>Pre-Heian Literature</i>	
<i>Heian prose Literature (794-1185)</i>	

<i>Kamakura Period (1185-1333)</i>	
<i>The Noh drama</i>	
<i>Sengoku Period</i>	
<i>Literature During the Tokugawa Period (1603-1867)</i>	
<i>Meiji Period (1868-1912)</i>	
<i>Postwar Period: 1945-Present</i>	
<i>Modern Poetry</i>	
<i>Manga (comic books)</i>	
<i>Note on the Importance of the Visual</i>	
<b>The Kabuki Theatre</b>	
<b>Film &amp; TV drama</b>	
<b>Music</b>	
<b>Graphic Art</b>	
<i>Nihonga</i>	
<i>Kimono Design</i>	
<i>Calligraphy</i>	
<b>Ceramics</b>	
Chapter Three .....	51
Transportation	
<b>Travel by Train</b>	
<b>Driving in Japan</b>	
<i>The Advantages of Train Travel</i>	
Chapter Four .....	58
Ethnicity, Politics and the Right to Vote	
<b>Who are the Japanese?</b>	
<i>The Ainu and Ryūkyū People</i>	
<b>Politics</b>	
<b>Nationality, Citizenship, and the Right to Vote</b>	
<i>Nationality and Immigration in Japan</i>	

Chapter Five.....	67
Architecture and Urbanism	
Architecture	
Architecture and Scenery in Kamakura	
<i>Modern architecture in Kamakura</i>	
Earthquake Resistance	
Pastiche of Americana	
Updated Tradition	
<i>Traditional Architecture in Kamakura</i>	
Scenery	
Urbanism in Japan	
<i>Kyôto</i>	
Chapter Six.....	87
Language	
A well-ordered, simple grammar	
The writing system of Japanese	
The distortion of English borrowings	
The Japanese use of “inventive” English	
Chapter Seven.....	97
Religion in Japan	
Buddhism	
<i>Buddhism and “Zen”</i>	
Shintô	
<i>The Sun-Goddess</i>	
<i>Natural Phenomena</i>	
Confucianism	
Christianity	

Chapter Eight .....	112
Health and Welfare	
<b>Longevity: 2.31 Million People Over 90</b>	
<b>Obesity, illness and early death</b>	
<i>Obesity and diet</i>	
<i>Diet: Japan/France/Switzerland/Belgium, and the US</i>	
<i>Diet: Japan</i>	
<b>Social Welfare</b>	
<i>Drugs</i>	
<i>Homelessness</i>	
<i>Suicide</i>	
Chapter Nine .....	128
Sports and Leisure in Japan	
<b>Baseball</b>	
<b>Other Ball Games</b>	
<b>Water Sports</b>	
<b>Golf</b>	
<b>Skiing</b>	
<b>Other Leisure Activities</b>	
<b>Sadô</b>	
Chapter Ten .....	137
The Economy and Manufacturing	
<b>History</b>	
<b>Government Intervention</b>	
<b>Currency Movements</b>	
<b>Japan's "gakureki shakai"</b>	
<b>"Great Makers of Things"</b>	
<i>"Sophistication"</i>	
<b>The Big Picture</b>	
<b>Empire</b>	
<b>World War II (1937-1945) and its aftermath</b>	

Chapter Eleven.....	150
Public Safety	
<b>Violence and crime</b>	
<i>Incarceration rate: per 100,000 population</i>	
<i>Guns and gun-control</i>	
<i>Drugs and violence in the “West” and Japan</i>	
<i>Violence in Japanese society</i>	
<i>General security</i>	
<i>Racial and ethnic discrimination</i>	
<i>Discrimination at local level</i>	
Chapter Twelve.....	161
End Notes: The Future	
<b>Introduction</b>	
<b>Japan and the United Nations</b>	
<i>Composition of the UN Security Council</i>	
<i>Acceptance of Refugees and Immigrant Workers</i>	
<b>Population Decline and Immigrant Workers</b>	
<b>Language Teaching in Japan, and the Alphabet</b>	
<i>The Use of English in the Workplace</i>	
<b>Japan’s Future Role in World Affairs</b>	
<i>Japan and Nuclear Disarmament</i>	
<i>The Trans-Pacific Partnership</i>	
<i>Japan’s Overseas Aid</i>	
<b>Christianity and Confucianism</b>	
<b>Little Things</b>	
<i>Japanese-Made Products</i>	
<b>Japan in international media/media of Japan</b>	
Bibliography.....	182



# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION: ASIA AND THE WEST

“[The Japanese] excel not only all the other Oriental peoples, they surpass the Europeans as well” (Alessandro Valignano, 1584, *Historia del Principio y Progreso de la Compania de Jesus en las Indias Orientales*).

### **Japan and Asia**

It goes without saying that the “Far East” label applied to the geographical region in which Japan is situated—Korea and China included—, is Eurocentric. Looking from Europe, that region is indeed at the far end of what was traditionally regarded as “the East”, or “the Orient”, which at one time began as close to Europe as the eastern borders of the Mediterranean Sea. (Thus, both Judaism and Christianity are Western Asian religions, although Christianity has Greek elements, from a linguistic viewpoint—and also from a philosophical one.)

But, looking across the wide Pacific Ocean from North America, Japan is geographically in the “far west”. The Western world is only just beginning to realise, over fifty years late, that the demographic and economic centre of the world has been moving towards Asia for decades. (After all, 60% of the world’s population is commonly said to be Asian—if “South Asia” is included.)

Japan was the pioneer in becoming the first fully “developed” nation in Asia, and—in doing so—in detaching itself from Asia.

### ***The Asia that Japan set aside***

The terms “Asia” and “Asian” need to be treated with great care where Japan is concerned. In normal Japanese parlance (unless we are talking in purely geographic terms), Asia is something that exists *outside* Japan. The East Asian continent is mostly looked at askance in Japan—much as the people of Great Britain denigrate the continent of Europe when it suits

them. This is surely one of the reasons for Brexit. The 2016-2020 push to exit the European Union is symptomatic of this tendency, and Japanese commentators draw this parallel with their own situation, as noted below.

In an 18-country (nine Asian, nine European) international survey in 2000, conducted by University of Tokyo professor Takashi Inoguchi, [...] only 26 percent [of Japanese] described themselves as Asian when asked about the larger grouping to which they belonged, compared to 80 percent [of] South Koreans.

The reason for this is simple. The Asian identity of Japanese has traditionally been weak. Japan is very much like Britain vis-a-vis their respective continents. Keeping the continent/mainland at arm's length is the best phrase to characterize their relationships with the continent. To both, the continent is a potentially troublesome place. (*Japan Times* Opinion—Ramesh Thakur and Inoguchi Takashi, 9 Nov. 2003)

In many media environments, especially when economic questions are being discussed, we see the expression “Asia ex-Japan”. There is some ambivalence about whether this expression is still relevant, yet the distinction between the two entities is nonetheless clearly made: “But Asian countries have made strides in catching up and are converging with Japan in interesting ways, such [sic] that they are even beginning to face challenges that Japan’s economy has long confronted due to its head start.” (K. Olsen, CNBC, 16 Jan. 2019)

The Japanese expression is *Nishi-gawa shokoku*, meaning “the various countries of Western allegiance”; this clearly implies Japan’s own inclusion. Japan is just too different from most of geographic Asia in culture, individual standard of living, and in manufacturing technology and quality to speak or write about in the same breath. In a word, it is more *Western*. Or, perhaps better, it is simply more *advanced*. I.e., in many areas it has gone further than much of the West—in the directions in which the West aims to succeed—to become something else: the “Far West”. (Cf. Guy Sorman’s 2008 article: “There is no map of the West. No map can work when some Asian nations are Western [Japan, Taiwan].”)

**Table 1-1 Annual nominal GDP of top ten producers (investopedia.com, March 2020)**

	1. US	\$21.44 trillion (USD)
	2. China	\$14.14
	3. Japan	\$5.15
	4. Germany	\$3.86
	5. India	\$2.94
	6. UK	\$2.83
	7. France	\$2.71
	8. Italy	\$1.99
	9. S. Korea	\$1.94
	10. Brazil	\$1.85

Table 1-1 shows that Japan, with less than 10% of China's population, has a nominal GDP of 36% of China's. As Investopedia state, "Japan is the third-largest economy in the world, with its GDP crossing the \$5 trillion mark in 2019."

**Table 1-2 World Bank export statistics for 10 major nations, 2019-2020 (USD x 1 million)**

1. China	2,641,247
2. US	2,504,293
3. Germany	1,806,221
4. Japan	917,873
5. UK	891,736
6. France	862,767
7. S. Korea	654,093
8. Hong Kong SAR	648,960
9. Singapore	645,593
10. Italy	632,507

The figures in Table 1-2 do not take account of the approx. US\$115 billion value of vehicles manufactured by Japanese companies in the US and neighbouring countries. Although these are not strictly exports, apart from certain engines and some other major parts, they expand the value of sales

by Japanese companies overseas to a total of USD1,033,673 million. (Of course Germany and South Korea also manufacture vehicles in the same region; we may now add Swedish-Chinese Volvo.) By contrast, the US does not manufacture vehicles in Japan, and exports only a negligible number there. In sum, Japan's exports exceed in value those of many major nations.

### *Self-modernising: “Out with Asia, in with Europe”*

More than 150 years ago, Japan had already set its sights firmly on Europe—and to a lesser extent the US. As a result, in many areas, Japan is in a league of its own. Briefly, in health care and longevity, relative equality of income distribution, education, public safety, public and personal cleanliness, social politeness, respect for the law, architectural and anti-seismic technology, precision manufacturing of all kinds, in sophistication of traditional culture—and in yet other fields such as cuisine, Japan is either no. 1 among nations, or very close.

Beginning in the mid-1800s, Japan set out to modernise itself—by itself—, un-coerced by Europe or the United States. The incursion of US Navy commodore Matthew Perry's small fleet of “black ships” into Edo (Tokyo) Bay in 1853 served mainly as a reminder of the technological advances of the Occident in general. Much medical knowledge had already been gained from a Dutch outpost in Nagasaki. Horse breeding and horsemanship were other fields in which Japan voluntarily dealt with Europe in the 1700s. The fraught term “the West” is geographically and culturally vague, but it is nonetheless obviously important for this book. However much one might prefer the word “Occident”, it is now somewhat dated; yet, being historically more confined to Europe—rather than the Americas—, that term is more relevant to the part of the world that pre-Meiji Japan set out to learn from.

This is evident from an important slogan adopted quite early in the Meiji Period (1868-1912), and well known among the Japanese people in general at the time. This is *Datsu-A, Nyū-Ô* (脱亜入欧), literally “Get out of Asia / enter Europe”: in other words, “Leave Asia behind and learn everything possible from European culture”. North America was just recovering from its civil war in the late 1860s; whether or not because of this fact, and despite the US's technologically important inventions of that time, the focus of Japanese officials was on Great Britain and the European continent, which for them *were* the West. (Throughout this essay I will indicate long vowels in Japanese. Vowel length is phonemic in Japanese; i.e. length distinguishes between meanings. For example, a long

ô can mean “Europe”, or “king”, depending on the Chinese character [*kanji*] used; a short o most often means “tail”. Big difference!) Both Japanese and non-Japanese media are remiss in not indicating long vowels in Japanese.

### **“The West” and “the East”?**

“The West” will for our purposes include the Greco-Roman heritage of European culture—later common to the US, and elsewhere—, and include Christianity (because of its long-term propagation in Europe and elsewhere), the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, individualism, and use of the alphabet. “The East” will be confined to what is generally known as the Far East plus Southeast Asia—i.e. the Indian subcontinent and Sri Lanka (whose languages are mostly Indo-European) will be set aside. So will the so-called “Middle East”, a Eurocentric term recalling Edward Saïd’s “Orientalism”. “The East” will include Confucianism, Buddhism, somewhat delayed (European-type) technological development, communalism, and present or past use of Chinese characters in writing.

#### ***The Enlightenment as a peculiarly Western cultural shift***

The loosening of ties to a religion-directed culture—choosing instead a life lived according to reason—, and the optimistic looking ahead to a future ruled by secularism, are typical of the Enlightenment. Post-Revolutionary France is a good modern example of a secular society. (The ground-breaking modernist poet Mallarmé dreamed of producing a magnificent Book which would replace the Bible.) There has been a certain turning away from committed traditional Christianity in the US. A similar tendency is seen in northern Europe, where Sweden has more Muslims than Catholics. This situation has opened the door to a return to classical philosophy and a scientific view of reality. The latter perfectly fits the current state of Japanese society and culture, where Christians number only about 1.5% of the population. The rest generally classify themselves as “nonreligious”. But this tends to underrate the huge influence of a long tradition of Confucianism, and the cultural and ethical codes it involves. Ironically enough, although Confucianist temples are rare in Japan, (particularly in comparison with the numerous Buddhist temples and Shintô shrines), it is Confucianism above all which rules Japanese society. It dictates the hierarchical relations between family members, in particular the respect for elder males. It’s almost as though the codes of European aristocracy have permeated the whole of Japanese

society. So, *noblesse oblige*—that characteristic watchword of European aristocracy—has been transmuted into an ethical code that rules Japanese interpersonal relations throughout society. Confucianism, in its contemporary version, is not so much an ancient Asian code of conduct as a “Western-seeming” code which happens to be practised in Japan. Japanese politeness is something else, once again going beyond the “West”.

This code of conduct, in its contemporary form, recalls the Victorian era in England, and a similar period in the rest of Europe. Japanese society is conservative to the point where some of the best qualities of that era in Europe—and perhaps also in the US—are still alive and kicking today. Life in Japan thus retains an aura of the “good old days”, which were of course based on a society with very clear class distinctions. But in Japan these classes are not based on inherited privilege; rather, Japan is a meritocracy, where one’s level of education determines a great deal—if not everything. To have attended good private schools from the start of one’s education is a great advantage. The exception comes at tertiary level, where some of the top national universities retain their erstwhile academic standard, and confer a clear leg up when it comes to employment opportunities. Even these national universities—which used to be free—now require tuition fees, although they are considerably less than those at the top private universities.

### ***Greek philosophy, Drama, Christianity, and Zen***

Japan has to quite an extent adopted the heritage of Greek philosophy, athletics, medicine, architecture, and democracy. Greek drama—with its complex psychological aspects—has in some respects a counterpart in the Kabuki drama which began in the Edo Period: there is a kind of chorus also in Kabuki, as well as musical accompaniment (cf. section on Kabuki in Ch. 2). Classical Greek drama is in fact quite well known in Japan: Oliver Taplin comments that the Japanese production of *Medea* by the Ninagawa Company was the best of all those he saw in London in the 1980s. (Taplin 1989: 128) Television dramas are as popular in Japan as in many parts of the world. Philosophy in Japan is generally confined to university departments and certain older Buddhist sects. Architecture is of course an extremely important part of everyday Japanese culture, even more so than it was in ancient Greece, and there are occasional, though rare, Greek elements in Japanese domestic architecture. Liberal democracy has been practised only since the late 19th century in various forms. Women’s suffrage in Japan can trace its beginnings back to democratisation brought about by the Meiji Restoration, with the suffrage movement

advancing during the Taishō period (1912-1926). The prohibition of women from political meetings was abolished in 1922 after demands from women's organizations. (Women have been able to vote in Japan's national elections since 1947—i.e. at about the same time as women in Italy and France. NB: universal suffrage was introduced in Spain only in 1975.)

It should not be forgotten that the Japanese ruling classes had quite extensive experience with European Jesuit missionaries after the arrival of St. Francis Xavier in 1548, and that Christianity made some 80 converts among feudal lords, and over 100,000 converts among the people in general in those early days. Of course Japan subsequently entered into the period of *Sakoku* (closed country) under Tokugawa Iemitsu, a period of isolation when Christianity was forbidden, which lasted from 1633 until 1853. But, this being Japan, where absolute values are avoided, the isolation was not total, and notable exceptions were made.

It is vital to grasp that, in particular since the re-opening of the country from the 1850s on, Japan has been focused—both technologically and culturally—on the West. Despite the Californian hippie-inflected tendency to imagine—particularly in the 1960s—that Japan is some kind of “mysterious East”, nothing could be further from the truth. Japan could surely not have become a dominant economic power by wallowing in its supposedly exotic past. The misguided use of the word *Zen*—particularly in the US—comes to mind. In French, *Zen* is sensibly used to characterise a kind of design which is *dépouillé*: shorn of all unnecessary ornament. In the American sociolect, however, the term often seems to be used under the assumption that Japan is somehow a repository of all sorts of recondite quasi-Buddhist theories connected with the martial arts, etc. It is important to realise that *Zen*—in the religious sense (the Chinese character means “meditation”)—in today's Japan is confined largely to a few temples (please see Ch.7 on Religion). It can be argued that *Zen* has an aesthetic influence in the practice of formal tea (*Sadō*, lit. “The Way of Tea”), which is in fact enjoyed mainly by a small minority of well-heeled older ladies. This subject is treated in more detail in the chapter on Sports and Leisure.

## Sports/Games

In certain contexts, the “leave well alone” attitude towards the Asian continent is softened. For example, Japan and South Korea jointly held the soccer World Cup in 2002—quite successfully, despite some controversy over judges' decisions. (Pls. see Figure 1-1.)

Fig. 1-1 2002 Football World Cup: winners Brazil vs Germany (© YouTube)



To the delight of South Korea, at a 68th birthday press conference the then Emperor Akihito publicly acknowledged that “it is recorded in the *Chronicles of Japan* that the mother of Emperor Kammu was of the line of King Muryong of Paekche”. (Kammu reigned in Japan from 781 to 806 AD, while Muryong ruled the Paekche Kingdom in Korea from 501 to 523 AD.) This courageous announcement of the Emperor’s, which he made in December 2001, looking forward to the joint Korea-Japan hosting of the 2002 soccer World Cup, was met with a blackout by most of the Japanese news media—so the indulgence only extends so far. On the South Korean side, the attitude is more critical, Korea having been occupied by Japan for decades (1910-1945).

Yes, the Korea-Japan relationship—perhaps precisely because it is one of ancient blood connections—is fraught with tensions. Because of the linguistic and cultural similarities, one may wonder whether today’s South Korea can be classed as “Asia” in relation to Japan. However from my own perspective as a 53-year Japan resident, I believe it can. And we should of course not forget Koreans’ own self-classification as Asian in the Tokyo University survey noted above.

There has been, for over a decade, a vogue in Japan on television for South Korean dramas, especially among Japanese ladies of a certain age

(sometimes thanks to plastic surgery, Korean actors can be very handsome). But the central Chinese government only too often uses Japan as a whipping boy in order to deflect popular attention from events unfavourable to that government. Japanese people as a whole are of course very aware of the role of Chinese and Korean culture in their own early cultural development, in a period that generally extends from as early as the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD up to the 11<sup>th</sup> century. When it comes to the language of the Korean peninsula, however, Japanese people (apart from some scholars) practically trip over themselves to deny the obvious connections. Independent academics are clearer: “Comparison [of Korean] with Japanese yields a surprising wealth of morphological and syntactical similarities” (Campbell 2005: 282). Many linguists see the two languages as belonging to a common “Altaic” linguistic group. The lights of Pusan in South Korea are visible from the Japanese island of Tsushima, which lies between southwest Japan and Korea. A look at a map makes it fairly obvious that there must have been considerable traffic between the two countries in prehistoric times—which for Japan means as late as the 5<sup>th</sup> century. (Over 10,000 years earlier, the islands of Japan were connected to the continent by land bridges, but the general consensus today is that there was considerable immigration to Japan from Korea during the Yayoi Period—(c. 300 BC-c. 300 AD.)

The above illustration from the 2002 football World Cup reflects the great popularity of soccer in Japan. Baseball (an American game with English roots) is even more popular nationwide, having been introduced as early as the 1870s. While traditional Japanese “martial arts” such as jūdō, kendō and kyūdō are practised to some extent in middle and high schools, they are much less important than baseball in society as a whole.

Golf is immensely popular among businessmen in Japan. Besides ball games, just about every sport imaginable is practised in Japan. Being an island country with a greatly indented coastline, water sports such as surfing, windsurfing, and yacht sailing are also popular.

### **“The Best from the West”**

In voluntarily and determinedly learning from the West—particularly since the 1850s—, Japan has been extremely discerning. To take something as simple as dairy products (traditionally not part of a Japanese diet), when it came to butter, Japanese technicians went straight to Normandy, which had the reputation of making the world’s best. Japanese high quality butter is superior to that of New Zealand, for example, which prides itself on its dairy industry. (Cheaper butter sold in Japan uses NZ milk-fat products,

but better-grade Japanese butter uses only the best Hokkaidō ingredients.) Since we are talking about culinary products this may be the place to mention the fact that Tokyo is the world’s centre of cuisine—well ahead of Paris (212 Michelin-starred restaurants in 2021 to Paris’s 120). New York and London come far behind in terms of the number of top-ranked restaurants. That Americans and other English-speakers habitually talk in terms of “food” is revealing: why, even *animals* eat food! In France there is *cuisine*, in Japan there is *ryōri*—which might be translated as “the art/principles of materials”. The contrast in attitude is clear: Japan’s is considerably more sophisticated.

The word “sophistication” is key in practically every area in which Japan outdoes the West. *Japan has pushed Westernisation in institutions and conventions and way of life to their logical conclusion.*

In the age of critical global warming—where there is a need, recognised in the 2015 Paris Agreement, to hold the atmospheric temperature rise down to 1.5° C for the remainder of this century—, Japan has long been pursuing a quite frugal lifestyle. One example: the incredibly complex train network (both under and above ground: see Ch. 3 on Transportation) of the Tokyo metropolis and its surrounding cities provides an example of low-cost community transport which is much safer—and better for the environment—than if everyone were to travel by car. Virtually no-one in Japan who works in a city commutes by car.

The quite mild spread of incomes from lowest to highest, coupled with the egalitarian desire not to stand out too much from one’s neighbours in size of house or car, means that Japanese modes of living are more like those of France or Italy than those of the US, where there are great extremes of poverty and wealth. Japan is possibly more egalitarian than any other major nation, as everyone can afford a house or apartment. (This is no longer true of certain smaller countries where there are currently unprecedented excesses at the top of the housing scale, partly due to a property bubble, and young people cannot afford to build.)

Meanwhile, the “pagan” countries of the east that took great pains to keep Christianity and other western imports at bay for many centuries (specifically China, Japan, and Korea) are thriving in the modern world in a way that most of the formerly colonized world is not. Clearly, more Christianity (or more Islam, for that matter) does not yield better societies. [...] One can only wonder where these [poorer] former colonies’ cultures would be today if they had been able to access the material benefits of the western world (i.e. medical science and technology) without the religious dogma. Perhaps they would look more like modern Japan does today. (“The Metaphorical Blindness of Sam Harris and Jordan Peterson” —Benjamin Freeland, 8 Sept., 2018)

To paraphrase Canadian psychologist Dr Jordan Peterson (YouTube), “the only countries worth living in today are those with a Judaeo-Christian background”. In the above quotation Freeland makes it clear that this is mistaken: the example of Japan is not allowed for. Freeland mentions also China and Korea as countries that are “thriving in the modern world”, but it is better to set them aside. China’s recent economic growth rate of over 6% per annum may be impressive, but it does not reflect a society that is comfortably well off. Chinese average annual income is difficult to pin down, but it ranges between 1/5<sup>th</sup> and 1/16<sup>th</sup> of Japan’s, depending on region. (It is an ironic fact that certain European university departments tend to group China with Japan in course descriptions: the two cultures, including spoken languages, could hardly be more different.) South Korea is in a higher category than China regarding incomes, but—as Freeland might have noted—today has a large Christian population. It is therefore highly ironic that Japan has a far more equitable and cost-effective health-care system than the overwhelmingly more Christian United States. In Japan, to repeat, Christians number *less than 2% of the population* (are you listening, Dr Peterson?).

## **What is Asian about Japan?**

### ***The Japanese Writing System and Chinese/Korean Influence***

The first writing system was devised by the ancient Sumerians, not later than the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC. (It had quite a lot in common with the earliest Chinese logographic system. Such systems are thus not especially Asian.) The Japanese language did not have a writing system until it borrowed Chinese characters (漢字/*hanzi*, Japanese *kanji*) after the 5th century AD, and then modified them to provide a syllabary in which Japanese could be written phonetically—making their system even closer to the Sumerians’. Some new arrivals to Japan are all agog at the idea that kanji provide a sort of instant graphic etymology for a large range of words. But, as is true of European languages, considering the history and origin of a word means stopping in the middle of a sentence and taking the time to consider the word’s structure; as any linguist knows, this cannot be done when speaking or reading rapidly. Most fluent readers of Japanese have forgotten about the etymology of a kanji, or a compound of two or more kanji, by the time they have learned it—and its various readings—thoroughly. Furthermore, form provides little clue to meaning in the case of many kanji.

Architecture and music are other obvious areas in which Japan historically owed a great deal to the continent. (The world's oldest wooden building, the temple of Hōryū-ji in Nara—a UNESCO world heritage site—was probably built with the help of Korean architects and builders.) But in Japanese publications, there is a certain amount of evasiveness as to whether Korea is involved as a source of cultural influence. As noted above, the Korean and Japanese languages have obvious grammatical affinities. But, exceptions aside, their sound systems could hardly be more different.

We shall return to the Korean writing system in Chapter 6 on Language. Here suffice it to note that kanji (Kor. *hanja*) were the main means of writing Korean until King Sejong the Great promoted the invention of phonetic Hangul in the 15th century. (The more ancient *Gugyeol* was an aid to Korean syntax when reading classical Chinese.) Even after the invention of Hangul, most Korean scholars continued to write in hanja. Hangul effectively replaced Hanja only in the mid-20th century. It might be said that Korea's adoption of phonetic hangul characters makes its writing system less Asian than Japan's. Yet the Tokyo University survey cited above shows that the Korean people themselves largely feel they belong to greater Asia, *whereas most Japanese people do not*.

### ***Architecture and City Planning: Chinese/Korean Influence Long in the Past***

First of all, China cannot be ignored as it provided so much cultural information, as well as a writing system, for 6th century Japan. It is interesting to note the many references to China—as “the land across the sea”—in Lady Murasaki's *Tale of Genji* (c. 1000 AD). Yet that long and (in Arthur Waley's case) beautifully translated book is in fact the world's first psychological novel, already superseding anything written in China or Europe to that date. It's also striking that it was written entirely in hiragana, the cursive phonetic script which women were supposed to use rather than kanji. After a time spent laboriously trying to represent Japanese speech sounds with Chinese characters, the Japanese—by about the mid-800s—developed a cursive syllabic script. In other words Japan had by then progressed past Chinese logograms to purely phonetic writing. (Again, this subject will be expanded further in Ch. 6 on Language below.)

The city of Kyōto (in which *The Tale of Genji* was written), at that time named Heian-Kyō, was planned—probably with the assistance of Chinese architects and city planners—on the model of China's Tang Dynasty capital of Chang'an. Kyoto is thus laid out on a neat checkerboard pattern

with the main streets running West to East numbered from 1 to 10 in a highly rational—and un-Japanese—way. Over the centuries, Kyoto's many temples and shrines (not to mention their gardens) have been altered subtly to suit Japanese taste, as have the many beautiful old townhouses with narrow frontages and floor plans extending far back from the street and including small interior gardens. Being so long and narrow, they've been aptly named "*unagi no ne-doko*" (the sleeping-place of an eel; illustrated near the end of Ch. 5). I spent a very happy year in Kyoto in 1967, but this is not the place to reminisce about the 1,200-year-old imperial capital, which is by far the most traditional of all Japanese cities. Kyoto is dear to the hearts of Japanese people for this reason, but no-one thinks of it as much more than an aesthetically rich tourist attraction—not to be emulated in other places. This is in some ways a shame. It would be rather nice to look forward to the day when the Japanese people in general rediscover the virtues of their long and sophisticated architectural tradition, and adapt it to the present. This is happening today, in small doses. In the meantime however, convenience and efficient heating and cooling take precedence over tradition.

### ***Domestic Architecture***

It is rare to find a modern take on a traditional Japanese house anywhere. And even here in our ancient capital of Kamakura (1185-1333), the number of older traditional houses is becoming fewer every year: not many more than a few dozen remain in 2022.

If the Japanese people differ from Europeans in not preserving their architectural traditions, that is partly because wood is much less durable than stone. May we say they have superseded Europe and the US in this respect? Perhaps we *can* say it's "super Western" to want to build the latest thing.

As evidence of this tendency, reinforced concrete has been adopted more widely in Japan than anywhere else in the world. Recent figures show that almost 1/4 of all prospective house builders choose either RC or steel frame construction, largely the former. This is partly because of their earthquake and fire resistance, and partly because of durability. In Japan, RC construction is only about 15-20% more expensive than wood (please see Figure 1-2).

Fig. 1-2 RC house in Kamakura (architect Fukuzawa Kenji, 1984; © author)



## Japan and The Novel Coronavirus

Japan's experience with the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic of 2019-2022 has been markedly less severe than in most other major industrialised nations, particularly than Europe and the US. The following quotation is from an article posted by BBC online World News around 5 July 2020. The journalist responsible is apparently an Englishman without long-term experience of Japan (he has been in the BBC's Tokyo office only since late 2012). His degree of fluency in the Japanese language is unknown. That the BBC should employ people of such a background to comment on Japan is a source of personal bemusement. After all, the journalist in question was *born* in the year this author first arrived in Japan, on a Ministry of Education scholarship...

[...] five months after the first Covid case was reported here, Japan has fewer than 20,000 confirmed cases and fewer than 1,000 deaths. The state of emergency has been lifted, and life is rapidly returning to normal. (Japan has had a relatively low testing rate compared to places like South Korea.)

There is also growing scientific evidence that Japan really has contained the spread of the disease—so far.

Telecom giant Softbank carried out antibody testing on 40,000 employees, which showed that just 0.24% had been exposed to the virus. Randomised testing of 8,000 people in Tokyo and two other prefectures has shown even lower levels of exposure. In Tokyo just 0.1% came back positive.

As he announced the lifting of the state of emergency late last month, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe spoke proudly of the “Japan Model”, intimating that other countries should learn from Japan.

Is there something special about Japan? (BBC news, Tokyo, 4 July 2020)

The journalist is right to ask “Is there something special about Japan?” (Typically of Anglophone writing, he puts the prime minister’s name back to front [admittedly a sign of Western-ness] and omits to mark its all-important long vowel. [Throughout this book, unless quoting, Japanese names will be given in the traditional order of family name preceding given name.]) He goes on to note Deputy Prime Minister Aso’s perhaps hasty comment that the reason had much to do with the “particular quality” of Japanese people: he used the expression *mindō*, literally “level of the populace”.

Let’s look at some figures. As of 10 Jan. 2022 the total US figure is nearly 47 times the number of Japan deaths; it would be fairer to say “over 18 times the number of deaths per million”. The numbers given on various websites for “cases” of the disease are surely of doubtful reliability unless an entire population is tested. People who carry the virus with no symptoms may go undetected. (As of late 2021, Tokyo was seeing only 20-30 cases per day. That was before Omicron.) The figures we shall compare are those for deaths per million of the national population as a result of contracting the novel coronavirus. Leader among more populous nations is Brazil with 2886 deaths per million. Next we have the US with 2573, followed by Italy with 2305, the UK with 2194, Spain with 1922, France with 1915, and so on down the line of mostly Occidental nations. Once hardly affected Vietnam was 348 per million, Japan’s number was 146, and South Korea followed with 118, and then we have China with 72. Perhaps we should set aside less-populated Australia and New Zealand with 92 and 10 respectively; they are undoubtedly Occidental-majority countries, but are geographically isolated in the southern hemisphere, and instituted strict residential “lockdown” policies, and were able to close borders to the outside world early in the pandemic.

Japan’s unemployment rate as a result of Covid-19 (as of June 2020) was the lowest of all OECD major economies, at around 3%. The US was nudging 12% and Canada was over 12%. (Source: Congressional Research

Service, as of 24 July 2020) The US figures have recently nearly halved (Nov. '21). The latest information from Japanese websites is still close to 3% unemployment; this is still under half the US/Canada figure.

Japan never had anything resembling a “lockdown”. The Japanese people trust their government, particularly when it comes to the charming lady governor of the world’s largest metropolis, Tokyo. Gentle recommendations were all that were necessary to encourage people to exercise *jishuku*—self-control. This is something that has been seriously lacking in parts of the United States, for example. In that country the word “Freedom” has long been a rallying-cry. But when you think about it, the fact that the Japanese government does not legally have the power to compel its citizens to stay indoors means that Japan may be a “freer” country than many others—including the US.

Sailing by oneself on an uncrowded sea is a perfectly virus-free activity, and I was fortunate to be often able to drive alone to the beach car park and set out in my small catamaran on Sagami Bay for a couple of hours in the beautiful sunny weather of April and May (ref. Figure 1-3).

Fig. 1-3 Hobie 16 catamaran on Isshiki Beach, Hayama (© author)



There is apparently an argument that China and South Korea and some Southeast Asian nations, having been exposed to SARS, have built up a

certain amount of immunity to the 2019-2022 pandemic. In the case of SARS, this is much less true of Japan, where there were only a few suspected cases and no fatalities—although some Japanese scientists have argued that there is perhaps a certain amount of latent immunity in the country. Japan in fact had 9.6 million visitors from China in 2019 (Nippon.com, Feb. 2020). A travel quarantine was introduced by China only on 23 February 2020, so many Chinese visitors were able to come into Japan after their outbreak of the pandemic. Yet Japan’s deaths-per-million figures are only a little worse than isolated, Caucasian-majority Australia.

Perhaps then-Deputy PM Aso’s comment regarding the “quality”—or level—of his own people is at least partially understandable in view of the Japanese qualities that I shall try to explain in this book. The idea that the Japanese people are somehow unique dates back at least to Japan’s imperial era and may seem to ring with a sense of ethnic superiority and cultural chauvinism. Mr Aso has been condemned for reflecting it, but it is not uncommon among Japanese people born pre-World War II. Japan was after all the only Far Eastern nation technologically advanced enough by the late 19th century to start to build its own empire in Asia. Unlike various European nations, it did not venture much further afield. True, the Japanese military did manage to get as far as the Hawaiian Islands and northern Australia, but those places were never occupied by Japan.

### ***Cleanliness, Personal and Social***

Why are Japan’s novel coronavirus numbers so mild compared with those of Europe and America? In a word: *cleanliness*. This is no doubt not the sole reason for Japan’s good numbers, but it must be an important factor. Traditionally, the Japanese people are perhaps the cleanest in the world. The daily hot bath—regardless of season—is a long-entrenched custom. People in the New World in particular often content themselves with a shower. Some houses there have no bath at all. A Japanese “bathroom” is in fact a combination of two rooms: a “changing room” with basin and towels and cupboards for cosmetics, etc., and then a dedicated bathroom, which is tiled on walls and floor, with a large floor drain—so that water may be splashed about freely. Washing is done *outside* the bath, which is only for soaking. This conserves energy, as two or more family members can soak in the same hot water. All soap and suds and bodily dirt are washed down the floor drain. The European idea of getting into a bath together with bodily dirt and soap is virtually unthinkable in Japan.

Shoes worn outdoors are left in the entrance (*genkan*) to a house or clinic, etc.—where there is a large closet for shoes—, and one changes into indoor-only slippers, which are kept in a separate closet. That way, dirt from outside is not tracked indoors, and interior floors remain clean. This custom dates from the days when people lived on tatami mats on the floor, and furniture was kept to a minimum. Tatami floors are still used in houses of traditional style, and some new houses often incorporate one tatami-floored room—partly for tradition’s sake, and partly for occasional use as a spare bedroom. Tatami mats are woven from sweet-smelling *igusa* grass. They are made in several layers, and are about 5 cm thick, so quite resilient. But most floors in contemporary houses are either wood flooring (often of oak), or carpet. One may still find a beautiful kind of dark grey slate traditionally used in certain areas, such as the *genkan*.

WCs are all bidet-style even in Japanese aircraft: “Washlet” is a TOTO company trade-name, but there are other makers. The seat is heated, and both seat and cover have a “soft-closing” feature. Water and seat temperature are adjustable, and some toilets will even dry your nether regions with warm air.

In public toilets, hands are washed after use by the vast majority in Japan (unlike in the US, for example).

Mask-wearing has a long history. This has been done for decades by people with colds or flu out of consideration for others. But probably the main reason from recent history is because of the annual springtime cedar pollen allergies. Trees cut down for the reconstruction effort after World War II on Japan’s steep mountain slopes were unfortunately replaced by cedars, which release their pollen in February and March, and on into April. In the warm dry air of spring, when a North wind blows, sometimes clouds of yellow pollen can be seen blowing across the cedar covered mountain slope opposite our house. I use the word “mountain” rather than “hill”, simply because Japanese hills are mostly so steep that they are impossible to build on. Amid the coronavirus pandemic, the wearing of masks in all public places was no novelty.

Japan is very particular about cleanliness in public spaces. Japanese trains are famous for being immaculate. People keep their cars extremely clean, both inside and outside. (For this reason, Japan is likely the best place in the world to buy a used car. The condition of the engine is another matter, but low-mileage used cars abound, as people in Japan generally do not commute by car, unless we are talking about more remote areas of the countryside.) Japanese people in general are very particular—not to say “picky”—about keeping their personal items and sports gear, et cetera, in tiptop condition.