

Some thoughts about Japan

To discover a nation's heart, examine its heroes. What sorts of heroes are popular in Japan? Often they seem skilled at working collectively. Few Japanese heroes joke around the way American heroes do – there's something almost painfully earnest about them. Whereas American heroes generally win in the end, in Japan this is less often the case. Revered heroes often go through ritualized heroic defeat. Their bravery is not in victory, but in their willingness to sacrifice themselves for a deeper cause. Less and less Japanese today have that spirit.

Japan is a place where most adults read comic books while young students are forced to read serious literary works. Why does this paradox exist? My belief is the educational system is askew. Perhaps one of the best ways to create an aversion for great literature is to force young students to read it, and then test them on minute trivia about it. Disassemble great stories in a dry, academic manner till they are sapped of vitality. Politically, there's an advantage to this: when 90% of a population reads only comics or magazines about sports and fashion, the populace becomes easy to manipulate.

Many forms of information are too restricted in Japan. In Tokyo there are under 20 TV and slightly over 20 radio stations. Information is tightly controlled. Why aren't there more radio stations broadcasting to specialized audiences? It seems the government wants people to have uniform interests. However, too much uniformity makes a bland society. Uniformity is good for automobile parts, but not cultures.

No Japanese prime minister since Tōjō Hideki has done more to erode democracy than Abe Shinzō.

Japan has a reputation for cleanliness. If you look closely, however, it seems undeserved. Trash abounds.

The only time you are likely to see Buddhist priests in Japan is when they are asking for money or doing funeral services. In other Asian countries, priests often interface with the community actively and talk with people who enter temples. In Japan, most temples are basically museums and funeral reliquaries rather than places of living Buddhist practice. Moreover, the way too many Japanese priests eat meat, drive Mercedes Benz, drink heavily, and enjoy sex makes many people disillusioned with organized religion. The corruption of the priesthood among all sects is rampant. Perhaps each person must learn to live like a priest and each action should be considered a process of worship. Ultimately, I believe there should be no distinction between laity and priesthood. Any person with a state of inner renunciation is a priest and any priest attached to the world, no matter what color their robes are, is lay.

If Tokyo really aspires to become an "Olympic City" then it should insist that all restaurants have smoke-free zones. The government's talk about "health" seems hollow since most restaurants in Edo are rife with cancer-causing cigarette smoke.

Many Japanese seem to feel about Koreans the same way Greeks feel about Turks. Instead of affirming their deep similarities, they often focus on differences. It is as if siblings from the same family harbored a sense of "us" vs. "them". People who are secure about who they are do not need to berate others from different nationalities.

Things Japanese can feel proud of: (1) a high degree of general literacy, (2) a basically honest police force and low crime rate, (3) a commitment to preserving cultural treasures, and (4) a language of superb subtlety.

If Japanese really revered Mt. Fuji, they'd take stronger steps towards cleaning up the cities at the foot of this mountain and moving the military practice range away from that sacred peak. Mt. Fuji is surrounded by urban sprawl, smokestacks, gunfire ranges, and parking lots. Fujisan is most beautiful from a distance: close up, its blemishes are all too clear.

Japan pays far too much attention to the United States and not enough attention to other parts of Asia. This overly American-centric thinking will, I believe, have unfortunate consequences. As America's power gradually declines and China's rises, Japan will find itself in a precarious position.

Japan is past its prime in so many ways.

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