

Japan's Possible and Potential Futures: The Images, Experiences and Identities of Japanese in a Wider Asia

Plotting the future, attempting to foresee how a society will come to think about itself in the world is, perhaps, an impossible task.

How can we know with any great certainty how people will come to think and feel about themselves as members of cultures, nations, or as part of the world as a whole?

In the midst of the Second World War, it was perhaps unthinkable that within half a century, social scientists and commentators would become concerned with documenting an increasing globalisation of money, hearts and minds.

We face a similar uncertainty now. Will the nation-state cease to hold the importance it once did? Will we increasingly come-together in larger diverse networks of continent or global-wide identities that offer great mobility and scale, or will we splinter apart into smaller regional and ethnic groups that offer us local meaning and a sense of place?

We may not be able to answer these questions with any certainty, but we can compare the present with the past to get some idea of the trajectory and direction of change.

Here the generation, or more specifically, generational change, gives us a window into the changing fabric of society, its emerging and fading identities. It is not an entirely reliable measure, as young people frequently become like their elders, as many of the 60s generation has illustrated. But it is a measure which reveals some of the core concerns of people thrust into new worlds of understanding, and in so doing, it uncovers some of the world that they perceive in existence around them.

In a Japan which many commentators still see as steeped in isolationism and homogeneity, how are young people perceiving their place in a wider world of Asian culture, heritage and history? If there are movements of collective identity—possible Japanese futures—being played out between Japan's generations, it is in the perceptions of Japan in a wider Asia that can, I suggest, lead us to better understand them.

The following research and its findings is based on 25 or so in-depth interviews with young people in their 20s and 30s from Tokyo, Nagoya and several town in Kyushu. The interviews enquired into the kind of

images that these young Japanese had of other Asian countries. They enquired into the kind of experiences and interactions that young people were having with other Asians when they travelled, and how these experiences were affecting the way in which young people were seeing themselves as members of Asia and/or Japan. How important was a Japanese and/or Asian identity to them, and what did they think about the distinctions and meanings of both?

IMAGES

The first thing to note with regard Japanese images of other Asian countries was just how many young Japanese I approached didn't just have images of other Asian locales, but had actually travelled to them. Only one of the 25 informants had not travelled abroad at all, and although initially I was only looking for people who had been to Asia, it would have been almost impossible to find a significant number who had not.

On first questioning, the most consistent images of other Asian countries matched this trend: they were seen as being cheap to get to and near Japan.

Images were then commented upon in terms of what one could do in each place: Various, it was thought that you could experience wonderful food in Korea and Thailand. You could go on brilliant shopping sprees in Korea and Hong Kong. You could visit beautiful resorts in the Philippines or Indonesia, and see and experience exotic and diverse culture in places such as in Singapore, Indonesia and Thailand. And, importantly, you could have access to all this culture, consumption and cuisine for a often a fraction of the cost of a trip to America or Europe.

Another layer into the questioning and my informants began to offer more culturally-loaded observations. A few mentioned that their image of Hong Kong was that it was obsessed with money-making. Some people who had been to the Philippines admitted that their image of the place was linked mainly to the fact that it had a high degree of poverty. This was even more pronounced for those who had visited Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.

Many informants commented that they thought Asian countries would hold similarities with Japan while offering many interesting differences. Koichi, a 25 year old man said that he thought that many Asians would—

quote—“be living a pure life in comparison to Japanese obsessed with work, money and consumerism”. Misako, a 32 year old, was not uncommon in saying that she had the image that Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos would have many cultural traditions that would be being threatened with an incoming tourism of great force and impact.

Images of other Asian countries also brought with them concerns about attitudes towards Japan. This was most pronounced in reference to Korea, a country which many of my informants had visited.

Chihoko, a 23 year old, who had visited a number of Asian countries said:

“My image of Korea was that it was good for shopping... and for Kimuchi, that spiced cabbage! But I suppose I also felt that there may be many Koreans who disliked the Japanese, because of things that have happened in the past.”

The treatment that they would receive in Korea as Japanese was a common concern for many informants. However, there was a general consensus that younger Koreans would probably not be as likely to discriminate or be prejudiced towards them as their elders.

The images of Asian countries presented a variety of understandings, concerns, opportunities and experiences, broadly illustrating that these young Japanese were knowledgeable and keen and confident in travelling to all the locations of the region.

The question becomes, then, how were Japanese young people received when they actually visited these countries? What were their experiences, and how did their interactions impress on their identities as Japanese as members of their wider Asian region?

EXPERIENCES

Predictably, my informants had a wide variety of experiences in their travels to other Asian countries. Overwhelmingly, however, they sought out, and found, ways to connect with their other Asian counterparts, to share experiences and form friendships despite cultural differences and residual nationalisms. Although in some cases, as we will see, there were difficulties, setbacks and barriers.

25 year old Koichi's experiences as a student in Thailand were revealing and somewhat exceptional in that he spent a year in the country as opposed to the typical five-day or one-week trip of the majority of my other informants.

On arrival in Bangkok, he told me that,
“The other students had this idea that Japanese were very serious and did things straight. They thought that all Japanese had lots of money and thought I was weird in leading the life of a poor student. They would ask me out to McDonalds and I would say things like: ‘Why go to McDonalds when you have so many wonderful and cheap food-stalls around here?’”

As Kochi pointed out to me, it wasn't just in the perceptions of food that he and some of these students differed.

“Many Thai students at my Bangkok university were obsessed with Japanese idols and would ask if I listened to Japan X or the like. When I replied, ‘no, I listen to African music’ they thought I was really weird. A Japanese who lived and dressed like a homeless man, sought out cheap back alley food, and listened to African music—it went against all their stereotypes!

I ended up getting on a lot better with people who had the same interests as myself—rugby, fitness training, etc.—we would go out together and laugh about how there were no cultural differences between us. I felt much more comfortable in the company of these guys. They didn't try and quiz me about all-things-Japanese, and I was able to be myself with them.”

Koichi's experiences help to illustrate how different perceptions of what common Asian culture is can co-exist, and actually come to stand in the way of successful cross-cultural interpersonal interaction. While Koichi refused to participate in a cross-Asian consumerist solidarity, so his Thai counterparts couldn't relinquish their group's key links to J-pop and McDonalds and take on Koichi's celebration of diverse global ethnicities.

Interestingly, however, while Kochi found his sense of solidarity among a group of Thais holding common interests rather than common consumer themes, my other informants found other-Asians' interest in Japanese popular culture useful in making those initial advances towards friendship.

Sawako, a 26 year-old woman said,

“While in Seoul I met this Korean guy about my age, who asked me about all kinds of Japanese things, from dramas to pop idols. It was obvious that he and others watched far more dramas than I ever had, and I couldn’t answer many of his questions about the actors and stars he wanted to know about. But he did ask me something I could answer: he asked me whether I thought that if he went to Japan people would be able to tell if he was Korean—he wanted to know if he could pass as Japanese. I said that I thought no-one would tell the difference, and he seemed really happy about this. But he also kept going on about exactly what was different between Koreans and Japanese, and led us to an interesting conversation. We became friends after that.”

Many of my informants talked about how other Asian young people seemed interested, or even fascinated by Japanese popular culture. Conversations such as this became jump-off points for the forming of friendships around the whole region. Around 30% of my informants had made friends with locals in places like Korea, Thailand and Indonesia and still kept in touch with them by letter and occasionally email.

If a commonly experienced Japanese popular culture helped to provide fuel for people to make lasting cross-cultural connections, the sense of being commonly exposed to a fast-paced modernisation gave some of my informants a much more fundamental sense of shared regional place and existence.

For Misako, a 32 year-old Kyushu teacher, an experience in a HoiChiMin bar confirmed the degree to which modernisation and industrialisation were key jump-off points for the imagining of a common Asian experience, existence and identity.

“This barman involved me in a discussion of how the area around his bar had changed so drastically” she said, “he said that ’10 years ago there was nothing around like there is now, and that the area has just exploded.’ He asked me if Japan had had a similar period of such fast-paced development.

We talked a lot about the similarities between the two places. How my once small town in Kyushu has grown-up so quickly into a bustling city. We talked about modernisation and how it affects people. How there were many similarities between this place and Japan, and the whole of wider Asia.”

For Misako, this experience and exchange was important in engendering the sense of sharing a common thread of cultural experience—of setting

Japan into the same developmental process and timeframe as other Asians.

As many of my informants observed, this ability to sense a common place in the common development of their Asian countries—*without* loaded cultural wartime narratives—seemed much more characteristic of their interactions with younger people around the region than older. And this was especially pronounced in reference to Korea where older Koreans were perceived as potentially hostile.

Emi's experience of Korea was marred by an encounter with an elderly stall owner who shouted at her and her friend for taking their time deciding what to buy (they concluded this was because they were Japanese).

Sawako sensed and explicitly stated that she felt a generational divide.

“When I went to Korea,” she said “it was just after the World Cup had finished, and young people seemed very involved in a sort of cultural reaching out. But older people still seemed to me quite scary in their coldness towards Japanese.”

These generational divides weren't just observed across old and young, but also amongst those in their thirties in comparison with those in their twenties.

Misako, a 35-year old Kyushu teacher put her thoughts into the following anecdote:

“I was at a restaurant in Pusan, Korea, and got talking to some local women, about my age, in English. They seemed very friendly and asked me and my friend where we were from. When we said ‘Japan’, they seemed to feel the need to make some kind of comment. Although they remained friendly, they said something to the effect: ‘well, things are fine now, but Japanese made life very difficult for the older generations.’ It was as if they needed to represent the pain of their parents and grandparents to us, even though, of course, we had no part and felt a million miles away from the generation and time they described. This wouldn't have happened in Japan,” Continued Misako, “I can't imagine two American girls walking into a bar and being told that ‘things are fine now, but you did drop that nuclear bomb!’”.

The way in which loaded cultural narratives were played out in the experiences of Japanese in Asian locales seemed directly linked to the age of those people they encountered.

For people in their 30s or older, the narratives of national membership in a perceived wider Asia were either seen as something that needed voicing in order to clear the air and provide a “blank-state” for interaction, or as too pervasive to provide any opportunities at all. In either case, older people’s interactions in Asia were not the same as those that my younger informants were experiencing.

For Akio, a 36 year-old salaryman, experiences abroad in the early 90s held clues as to why this was the case:

“I was travelling in Australia in 1990 and there were, of course, many people from all over South East Asia there. As soon as some of them heard that I was Japanese they would come over and try to make friends. They had heard that Japan was a super-rich country—this was still just about in the bubble period—and just assumed that because I was Japanese, I must be rich too. I remember thinking how ridiculous this image was and was sure more than a few times that the person shadowing me had a larger bank balance than myself.”

Akio’s relative age meant that his experiences with other Asians were set into a different cultural background and set of symbols from my other informants. As Akio himself explained:

“The image of Japan and the Japanese as a particular kind of people with particular attributes and financial wealth seemed so strong and so loaded with wartime relations as to prevent normal conversation. I remember, for instance, a Korean guy saying to me before we even had a chance to ask each other’s names ‘you probably hate me because I’m Korean’”.

If the early 1990s seemed trapped in a continuing set of wartime perceptions, there also didn’t seem to be the same opportunities to keep in touch with those people he did make friends with and this combined to present barriers to interaction. Akio continued, “There was no ability to keep in touch over the internet, then. Now the way that other Asians approach Japanese is different. It seems to happen with much more of a sense that people are on an equal footing. There seems more of a sense of commonality—stereotypes and images are being broken down”.

But if this really was the case—if there has been an accumulation of cultural relativism in the region—as Akio seems to suggest, then how can we see that contemporary experiences are really challenging old, and

bringing in new, conceptions of cultural, national and regional identities for young Japanese?

IDENTITIES

The first thing to note in the conception that my informants had of their identities as Asian and/or Japanese was the degree to which there was a need to integrate their cultural experiences into an outlook and worldview that relativised cultural diversity rather than put one country above or below another. Koichi—the young man who was a student in Thailand for a year—said,

“I want to say that I am Asian, but I think there are many differences internally, within the countries themselves. Maybe it is a question of the pace of development that regions go through that means it’s difficult for them to support a common way of life. But this doesn’t mean that we should rank countries and cultures, just acknowledge that each presents a wide range of lifestyles and ways of living. I have been to Spain and all around Europe, and there’s loads of real *inaka*—countryside—there; places that are similar to Asian locales. Asia and the rest of the world are at the same stage, really. It’s just our images of what countries are and what they contain that need to catch-up”.

Koichi’s identity was relativised in a way that transcended national boundaries and cross-cultural differences. His Japaneseness was almost incidental to him as a person; it was merely the accumulation of cultural experiences and exposure to certain traditions. It held no special high-ranking significance in comparison to other groups of people in the world, indeed, its definition required of it an entirely balanced and equal footing based on common diversity.

There was little doubt that his in-depth experiences in wider Asia and beyond helped him to come to these worldviews. However, while my other informants had not had the same immersion in another Asian countries—and therefore represented more accurately ordinary Japanese—there was a process of negotiating and framing cultural relativism going on in the minds and expressions of them all. Typically—as in Koichi’s case—this relativism was understood through comparisons with America, Europe, or the ‘West’.

Chihoko 22 said,

“If you go to America or Europe you feel Asian, as Japanese culture seems so different from Western culture. But in Asia, for me at least, I feel more Japanese, as the differences seem more regional and linked to economic position.”

Megumi, 22 said,

“There are things one can’t understand or enjoy in Europe if you don’t understand Christianity. Whereas in Asian countries those divides don’t seem to exist as much—there is a common sort of base and shared approach to life.”

Alongside these typical responses ran a common perception that Japan needed to move away from a dependence on Europe and America in positioning itself in the world. It was far more important—and in fact there was probably nothing quite *as* important as Japan’s future many informants stressed)—than moving away from comparing itself to America, and towards grounding itself in a wider Asia.

Emi said,

“In the future I want part of me to take the traditions and identity of Japan, whatever that comes to mean; but I would like that ‘me’ to be part of a bigger story and membership—a member of a rich set of Asian countries and traditions. This is happening now, I suppose, but there needs to be a more concerted effort to stop seeing America as so important for Japan’s existence.”

“How will Japan change as a whole in the future?” repeated Hiroki in response to my question. “Let’s hope that it can stop looking to America for direction. There are so many fascinating countries and people in our own region that we can identify with.”

There was a distinction between informants in their 30s and younger people in their 20s in the certainty with which they saw Japaneseness as compatible with Asianness—degrees to which people felt that Asianness was a view that they wanted to incorporate or press towards as part of Japan’s future. This seemed to have much to do with the experience in the 80s and 90s of being overly stereotyped by other Asians as rich or somehow special in the region.

Akio’s experiences in Australia—meeting many other Asians during his time there and being treated almost as if he was abnormal—are a good example.

“I feel first and foremost Japanese. I don’t see myself as Asian at all.” He said in a comment not untypical of those in their 30s who had travelled in their early 20s and experienced such stereotyping.

There was a sense in Akio of being almost pressured into identifying oneself as Japanese due to international stereotypes that again ran through the concerns of the older set of informants.

As well as illustrating how much seems to have changed in the last two decades with regard the perceptions of Japan in Asia and of the Japanese towards other Asians, these age divides emphasise the degree to which the way we are perceived by our significant others has so much to do with the collective identity we end up taking on, our worldview, and our ability to reach out and find, order, and represent the diversity we encounter.

CONCLUSION

The many micro-interactions that had occurred between my informants and the locals of other-Asian countries combined to engender a sense of togetherness through cultural exchanges and socio-economic comparisons. There was a sense of empathy and closeness that came out of these experiences which seemed to mean far more to my informants than being able to feel technologically or culturally “superior” and/or somehow “aligned” with the West. Indeed, it was to this conversely empowered persona of the Asian confidant and member—and away from alignment with the West—that my informants overwhelmingly pressed towards in their visions of Japan’s possible and potential futures.

In many cases, then, it seemed that it was the combination of challenging a Japanese identity defined vis-à-vis the West, and experiencing a sense of parallel Asian social development—of moving into a sense of existing in the same temporal Asian time and space—that worked to bring a sense of Asian place, and by extension, global positioning, to these young Japanese. And it was this sense of global place and security that, coming around full-circle, empowered them to approach, empathise and identify themselves with their other-Asian counterparts, to relinquish whatever status they inherited from the playing out of received narratives of economic and cultural nationalism over the past decades.

The ability to for my informants to fully perceive this sense of living in the same world, however, was confined to those in their 20s who had not

on the whole felt stereotyped by other Asians as rich and only associated with Japan's bubble period. For my older informants, the self-consciousness that such experiences had brought them made them too aware of their status as Japanese to move beyond the cultural narratives that such stereotypes invoked. They became confined within a Japanese identity tied to a specific time and historical space that inhibited their getting on-board a common Asian, or global vision.

It may be accurate to suggest, in light of my informants' images, experiences and identities, that one of Japan's potential and possible futures is to take for itself the role of mediator, to lead its region into feeling the same worldly confidence and sense of place that it has come to, without seeming to be appearing superior or 'in league' with the West. Whether those at the forefront of this movement and worldview—the young generation of Japanese—will continue to have the sensitivity and cultural outreach that they seem to currently display is open to question. But it is clear that bridges are being built everyday by these young Japanese and their other-Asian counterparts, bridges that may, in other country's possible futures, bring as many benefits to their neighbours as they are currently returning to the cultural richness and diversity of these young people's worldviews.

Lastly, in understanding the emerging patterns of transnationalism and identity there is, perhaps, nothing more salient than the cross-cultural micro-interactions of the sort my informants described and experienced. Not only do they have the power to change and re-direct senses of collective solidarity, but in so doing, they represent a wider struggle to integrate national identities designed and maintained principally for political means and ends, with culturally relativised identities that attempt to set new frameworks for self-expression and go beyond the limits of State-conceived solidarity. There seems little more pivotal in the making of a truly transnational future than challenging and negotiating this very divide. Where such efforts will take us in terms of forming larger global, or smaller ethnic, collectives, is still anyone's guess. But if what Japan's young people suggest is that we are increasingly attempting to consolidate our own definitions of our place in the world with those set by our country's political and media elites, then they could well be demonstrating more than their own possible and potential futures and those of the region; they may well be presenting the possible and emerging futures, and the struggles that they will bring, of and for us all.

