

“What are the common perceptions of Japan held by Australians and do they reflect reality?”

By Clare Daly

My neighbour Japan

In the 2006 Australia-Japan Year of Exchange we have the opportunity to reflect on the relationship between Australia and Japan. With political and economic ties increasing, Australians are gradually growing familiar with Japanese culture and society. All Australians have perceptions of Japan, but how well do we really know our neighbour with whom we share political and security objectives, and the people who make Japan what it is?

Travel brochures display images of cherry blossom, snow capped mountains, Zen gardens and ancient temples. Australians perceive most Japanese people to live in very crowded cities. With sparsely populated mountains comprising more than three quarters of the land mass of Japan, the vast majority of Japanese inhabit intensely crowded cities on the coastal plains. Fewer than 25 per cent¹ of Japan's 127.9 million (UN 2005) people live in rural areas. The beauty of rural Japan is highly prized, but the average Japanese citizen lives in high rise apartments with very little greenery.

Japanese people are perceived to be similar in physical appearance, be well mannered and sincere. Japan does not have the cosmopolitan mixture of Australia. *Richard Tames* observes “No other nation with a population over 100 million exhibits such homogeneity.” He notes that 87 per cent say that they like to look like everyone else.² Furthermore, most Japanese tend to marry and stay in Japan. This situation is slowly changing. Between 1986 and 2004, the number of Japanese living abroad increased 193 per cent,³ and international migrants to Japan increased by 279.9 per cent. A slight trend away from conformity might be indicated by Prime Minister Koizumi's flamboyance, which included collar length permed hair. Increased exposure to Western society is gradually influencing attitudes towards everything from hairstyles to career and spouse choices.

¹ <http://news.bbc.co.uk>

² Tames, Richard, *A traveller's History of Japan* 2003 p2

³ <http://web-japan.org> Statistics – migrants.

Japanese men are seen by Australians as well dressed, hard working with a smaller physical structure. The view that Japanese men are a smaller physical stature does not reflect reality; between 1948 and 1978 the average height of 14 year old boys increased by 17cm.⁴ Japanese men can often successfully mix traditional and western clothing to suit their comfort and sense of style. Although most men wear suits to work, many slip into a comfortable yukata (unlined cotton kimono) when at home. The current trend is to wear them to basket ball and soccer matches or outdoor parties.⁵ Formal traditional kimonos are reserved for festivals and special occasions such as Oshogatsu (New Year Holidays) and Shichigosun (seven–five–three).

Many Australians consider Japanese women are meek, quietly spoken and not sharing the gender equality of Australian women; this perception does not reflect reality. “Quietness doesn’t mean weakness”⁶ is taking Australians a long time to appreciate. Japanese women have been the head of households for many years. Many married women with children have elected not to be in the labour force in the past, because it was socially unacceptable or childcare was difficult to find especially if grandparents were unavailable. Instead they have chosen a quality lifestyle of sporting activities, yoga, poetry, classical music and calligraphy. Today there is a growing trend for women not to marry or have children and continue in the work force. Evidence of this is the declining fertility rate to 1.29 per cent. Increasingly women are entering male dominated areas. For example, the proportion of women in the Diet (parliament) has grown from 3.6 per cent in 1986 to 9.25 per cent in 2004. Gender equality has been a priority in government planning for more than 20 years.⁷ Women’s expertise was highlighted after the recent tsunamis in Asia, where the Japanese advocated “that women must be at the heart of the recovery process”⁸. This belief was supported with a US\$ 1 million donation to achieve this aim. Women will increasingly play an important role Japanese society.

⁴ Tames, Richard, *A traveller’s History of Japan* 2003

⁵ <http://web-japan.org> Kids Web – Japan – Housing

⁶ <http://www.womenaustralia.info/biogs>

⁷ www.gender.go.jp/english_contents/index.htm

⁸ <http://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/speech/un2005>

Australians see the Japanese rice based diet as contributing to their long life expectancy. Although rice continues to be the staple food, fast food such as McDonalds, Indian curries and French cuisine are also enjoyed. Japanese people eat more fish than people of other nationalities.⁹ Rice provides energy and starch, fish provides protein and fat, seaweed and soya beans are rich in vitamins, minerals and fibre. An international comparison of life expectancy at birth shows Japanese men and women out-do other leading nations. Japanese male babies born in 2004 had a life expectancy of 78.64 years and females an amazing 85.59 years.¹⁰ The design and visual appeal of a Japanese meal is as important as the preparation; colour, shape and ingredients are all valued. Importing food has insured supply, including meat and fruit which was once reserved for the sick. Australian beef exports to Japan was worth \$A2,368 million in 2005. With more and more Australians becoming diet conscious sushi is a healthy solution, low in cholesterol and calories and high in nutritional value. Australians are correct in their perception of the Japanese traditional diet health benefits, and are using this to their benefit and enjoyment.

Australians perceive that anime (cartoons) are for children. In reality anime is also very much for adults. Australian children shared the love of the Hello Kitty cartoon character and products, appreciated by Japanese people well beyond childhood. The love of anime is such a big business that in 2005 a museum of anime was open in Japan to record and preserve the memories of the likes of Astro boy, Pokemon and Pikachu.

Australians and Japanese have a variety of perceptions of each other. Perceptions which come from different experiences and need to be examined with an open mind. Differences can add depth to friendship. In getting to know each other, Australians and Japanese can together build the next generation who share a special relationship which extends beyond friendship to include mutual understanding, respect, openness to change, new ideas, and new ways.

⁹ Kalman, Bobbie, Japan the people, 1995

¹⁰ <http://web-japan.org> Statistics - Vital Statistics – International Comparison of Life Expectancy at birth

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