
TWENTIETH AUSTRALIA-JAPAN ESSAY CONTEST

Junior B: “Explain how the traditional and contemporary aspects of Japanese culture are finding popularity in various ways in everyday life here in Australia. Examine ways in which Japan is represented in Australia and discuss your opinion why these particular aspects are appealing to Australia.”

Karate, Karaoke and ... Kimonos ?

Karate and *karaoke* are two words that have come to form an integral part of contemporary Australian culture. The words have long been detached from their Japanese origins and are now simply seen as yet another piece in the unique mosaic of Australian culture. Japan is represented in many ways through the technology we use today, the types and forms of entertainment we enjoy and the variety of foods from which we choose to eat. These changes have been the result of a number of activities, which complement the strong trade and economic relations between Australia and Japan. These activities include cultural exchange programs, Japanese festivals, the teaching of the Japanese language to school students and the success of Japanese companies in Australia. In my opinion, the cultural awareness these programs create is critical to how the various elements of Japanese culture have and will continue to find popularity in Australia.

Cultural exchange programs are perhaps the most important way through which features of both contemporary and traditional Japanese culture become known in Australia. Japan has long been known to have a very high percentage of native Japanese people, and indeed foreigners are a rarity in Japan¹. This fact creates a missing link within Australia - Japan relations where ideas cannot be exchanged between the two nations. However, with cultural exchange programs, people travel between the two countries and thereby introduce the various aspects of the culture of the country they visited, to their home country. Each year Japan accepts about 100 students sponsored by the Rotary Clubs of Australia under the Youth Exchange Program. Also, the popular Japanese Exchange and Teaching Program (JET) allows

¹ Culture Shock: A Guide to Customs and Etiquette in Japan

Australians to gain a posting as an English teacher in Japan for a certain period of time. These programs allow those involved to gain a better appreciation of the Japanese culture, which is essential to any aspect becoming accepted into Australian culture.

Similarly, sister city or school relationships which allow for the exchange of cultural values, ideas and concepts are very beneficial for Australia - Japan relations. Presently, there are 85 Japanese sister-city relationships across Australia². Also, in a sister school relationship, the Australian students involved, benefit greatly from appreciating the many different aspects of Japanese culture, which they previously did not know about. Once again, cultural awareness is crucial to how any aspect of either traditional or contemporary Japanese culture finds popularity.

On the topic of cultural awareness, Japanese events, festivals and organisations in Australia contribute significantly to raise the profile and awareness of Japanese culture in Australia. The recently held Japan Festival 2002 in Melbourne was an excellent example of how various features of both traditional and contemporary Japanese culture are finding popularity in Australia. The festival featured items such as *origami*, calligraphy, *bonsai*, martial arts, dancing, tea ceremonies, kimonos, food and so much more. The festival showcased the enormous depth of Japanese culture and the value of understanding and appreciating it.

The Ikebana International Sydney organisation is an example of how Japanese organisations promote greater cultural awareness.³ This non-profit organisation was created to allow people to unite in their common love of flowers and flower arrangement. The organisation states that because of their “close affiliation with the Japanese community, they allow members to develop a greater appreciation of Japanese culture”⁴.

Teaching the Japanese language to school students plays an important role in Australia - Japan relations. Japanese language education at my school encompasses not only the hiragana characters and words made up from them, but also the many

² <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/australia/index.html>

³ <http://www.ikebanahq.org/>

⁴ <http://www.ikebanahq.org/>

aspects of Japanese culture that students do not know about. Students learn about religion (Shintoism), literature (*manga*), social etiquette (bowing and hand gestures), seasonal activities (*hanami* and *o-tsukimi*), daily routines and annual celebrations. In this method of teaching, students become more culturally aware of the many activities that are available to them, and may then choose to participate in them. Japanese language teaching in Australia is on the rise as well. Schools and governments have realised the need of teaching the national language of their primary economic and trade partner⁵, Japan, to school students.

All Japanese companies strive to achieve two primary goals: the pursuit of excellence and exceeding the highest standards of quality in their products and services. Through achieving these goals, they have become very successful in Australia. But these goals are not unique to Japanese companies – they are an essential part of Japanese culture, which Japanese people also aim to achieve in their daily activities. As a result, Australian companies have had to compete with Japanese companies and so they too must aim for excellence in all their products and services. The employees will do likewise in their daily activities as well – and this will pass onto those around them.

After explaining how the aspects of Japanese culture are finding popularity, it is logical to follow on to what these particular aspects are, or how Japan is represented in Australia. The three broad areas in which Japan has influenced our lives are technology, leisure and entertainment.

The first thing, most Australians associate with Japan is electronics and the words “Made In Japan”. This association has come about over many years in which Japan has proven itself to be a world leader in the creation and supply of cutting edge technology and an exceedingly high standard of quality. Japan is a major manufacturer of electronics in all departments such as cars, portable entertainment devices, cameras, entertainment devices and the list can go on. Brands such as Nintendo, Toyota and Sony have become household names because of their high standards of quality and functionality.

⁵ <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/australia/index.html>

Of the three areas mentioned, Japanese culture has influenced our leisure activities the most. Karaoke is the most well known example and many people go to a karaoke bar after work or on the weekend to relax and relieve themselves of stress. Many forget that karaoke is indeed a Japanese word and that it has become such an important part of their lives. Popular Japanese music has also found popularity amongst school students in Australia, especially those of Asian descent. In addition, Japanese music has become a regular feature at licensed clubs across Sydney. Japanese food has found popularity with Australians as well, with sushi bars and restaurants appearing in almost every area of Sydney. Another area of Japanese influence has been on Australian relaxation and massage centres. With the introduction of Japanese relaxation methods such as shiatsu and reiki, many centres have adopted these as their primary selling point. The reasons these methods are appealing to Australians are clear – their results have been tested and proven to work, mainly because their roots are traditional and have become widely accepted in Japan.

Japan has also influenced children's television in Australia. Japanese cartoons have had enormous success in Australia over the past few years. Who could ever forget the cute face of Pikachu? Its face appeared on shirts, caps, cards, wallets and almost anything else one can think of. The reasons for Pokemon's success are easily seen from one look at an episode – the characters are attractive, the Pokemon (Pocket Monsters) are cute and the story line is fascinating.

The Japanese martial arts are well known and respected in Australia. The main ones are karate, judo and kendo. They are appealing to Australians for a variety of reasons – they are skills that can be kept for life, they are a great way to meet friends and an even better way to stay healthy.

In conclusion, I believe that cultural awareness is and will continue to be the key to any aspect of Japanese culture finding popularity in Australia. This cultural awareness has been facilitated through cultural exchange programs, teaching the Japanese language to school students and many other ways. When any aspect of Japanese culture has found popularity in Japan itself, it is more than likely, that aspect

will gain acceptance in Australia as well. Japan is represented in Australia in many areas such as technology and entertainment. In my opinion, Australians have accepted these changes because they enrich the quality of their lives and raise the standard of their living.

All these influences of Japanese culture are appealing to Australians because of a simple fact – we are recognising the tremendous value of appreciating and embracing Japanese culture.

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