

The land of clean stadiums and bottoms

OPINION

Steve Evans

WHAT do you associate with Japan?

Order, perhaps? Tradition? Respect for old people? Or ultra-modern technology, a vibrant youth culture, and manga comics?

Maybe cleanliness or the nuclear accident at Fukushima?

Delicate flowers of exquisite beauty, or the warrior culture? Immaculate doll-like women and businessmen in identical suits - or the weight of the sumo wrestler?

Images get transformed when viewed around the world. Every Olympics reveals a country in a new light. That's why governments spend billions holding them.

Australia, remember, emerged from "the best games ever" as a "modern", can-do country, confident and easy in its own skin.

"Sydney 2000 provided a striking opportunity for Australia to project a global image as a sophisticated, multicultural nation," says Professor David Rowe of the Institute for Culture and Society at Western Sydney University.

SO WHAT MIGHT WE LEARN ABOUT JAPAN?

The first thing to say is that it is complex: every cliché will have a contrast.

It is certainly a country of orderliness. Trains arrive on time, to the second. But there is also a strong counterculture of goths and grunge. One of the country's most prominent symbols is the chrysanthemum - but another is the samurai sword.

Anybody who knows Japan will tell you about cleanliness.

"Stadiums are not left like they are in Australia," says Dianne Fitzpatrick, the president of the Australia Japan Society in the ACT and a high school teacher of Japanese.

There are recycling bins outside sports events. "Everybody takes their rubbish and recycles it, and if there are no recycling bins, they take it home and recycle it."

And there isn't just one recycling bin, but a range for different materials.

CLEANLINESS PLUS TECHNOLOGY

Japanese toilets are wonderful (but mysterious to unsuspecting outsiders).

The lid rises as you approach. They need programming. Sudden jets of water can be surprising. There are sensors. Top of the range models offer a choice of sounds - there's flushing, but also Mozart or the crash of ocean waves.

The options can seem complicated to Westerners who are more used to the basics



Japanese ambassador Shingo Yamagami with Olympic mascots. Picture: Elesia Kurtz

(though Leonardo di Caprio and Madonna are said to be big fans).

As is the Japanese ambassador to Australia, Shingo Yamagami. "They are much cleaner. They clean up your bottom," he tells this paper.

His excellency is also a big fan of the ancient Japanese tradition of the soak in the bath. It is "mental refreshment", he says. He maintains that he can read his mobile phone while indulging in a soak.

Japanese inns have what are called "onsen", filled with natural mineral water, rising from deep in the Earth. Onsens are about mental ease as much as cleanliness.

"I really miss onsen," says Naoko Lamb, who has lived in Australia for more than 40 years. "You get a very elaborate meal - 20 courses. You have an onsen before a meal and an onsen after it, and when you go to bed and when you get up."

WHITE GLOVES

Japanese taxi drivers often wear white gloves as part of a uniform (and, by the way, the back door opens automatically to let you in).

The white gloves are more about orderliness than cleanliness - and orderliness is also a characteristic which people who love Japan mention. Even in an ultra-high-density city like Tokyo, there is politeness and civility on crowded public transport. "We strongly encourage people not to speak in public on smartphones," the Japanese ambassador says.

The pedestrian crossing outside Shibuya station is a wonder of unorganised organisation. At the peak, in the breaks between car traffic, 3000 people walk across at a time, crisscrossing each other, usually without rancour or collision.

Punctuality is part of this orderliness.

[Japanese toilets] need programming. Sudden jets of water can be surprising. There are sensors. Top of the range models offer a choice of sounds - there's flushing, but also Mozart or the crash of ocean waves.

Trains arrive and depart to the minute, including the 600km/h Shinkansen. Carriages are immaculately clean, and the guard bows to the passengers when he or she enters the carriage.

BUT: THERE'S A PARADOX

The more you get to know it, the more there is to know. There is the emphasis on relaxation - but look a little closer and you'll see stress is high.

"The suicide rate for youngish women has gone right up through Covid," says Shiro Armstrong, director of the ANU's Australia-Japan Research Centre.

He blames loneliness and a lack of financial and community support for single women during the pandemic. "That has disproportionately hit women, and that's sad," he says.

Women have made progress, he says, but with more to go. There are more women with careers - but they are careers which stop abruptly when they "have kids and drop out".

More widely, Japan defies easy stereotypes, he says. "On the surface, it is very comfortable, safe, clean - but under the surface, there are problems of increased inequality and low growth."

Despite his qualms, Dr Armstrong loves the country in its complexity. He likes its meticulousness.

When Japanese coffee-makers heard that Australians made good coffee, they came to find out exactly how an Australian flat white was made. "They aren't going to just learn online. They will spend significant time in Melbourne learning how to do it," he says.

"No other place has things sorted out quite like Japan. If they are doing something, they are going to do it well."

Like the Olympics, we hope.

Spirit suffers mercy rule thumping in return to action

SOFTBALL

AUSTRALIA waited 13 years for softball's Olympic return, now they have a single day to restore confidence and their bid for gold after losing 8-1 to Japan in the opening event at the Tokyo Games.

Two-run home runs from Minoru Naito and Yamato Fujita, in the third and fourth innings respectively, underlined Japan's dominance as empty stands and limited fanfare in Fukushima marked the competitive start of the Olympics.

The mercy rule was invoked when Yu Yamamoto cleared the fence for another two-run homer in the bottom of the fifth, boosting the reigning Olympic champions' lead to seven runs and ending the match in the process.



Australian pitcher Tarni Stepto in action against Japan.

There is scant time for the Spirit to dwell on the shellacking.

Australia return to the same venue for a crunch clash with Italy at 4pm AEST on

Thursday. The top two sides in the six-team competition advance directly to Tuesday's gold-medal match, so another defeat would be a hammer blow to Australia's hopes of securing their first Olympic gold medal in the sport.

Captain Stacey Porter, the only player in Australia's squad to have previously competed at an Olympics, insists her squad will rally. "We knew game one was going to be tough," Porter said. "We'll do our recovery, watch some video."

"We have to get back up. I'll make sure the girls are in a good headspace tomorrow."

Pitcher Mana Kuwabara and catcher Himeno Miyata, local school students who experienced the region's earthquake in 2011, combined for the ceremonial first pitch.

The absence of fans, just 11 days after COVID-19 cases forced the local government to give up hope of a crowd, created what Porter termed a "different atmosphere".

"Us Aussies can create an atmosphere, that's what we did within the dugout," the 39-year-old said.

The sense of occasion clearly did not unsettle the Spirit, who played with more composure throughout the first dig.

An uncharacteristically skittish start from pitcher Yukiko Ueno, whose list of accomplishments include the only seven-inning perfect game in the history of the Olympics, helped the visitors seize momentum.

Ueno walked Stacey Porter then hit batters Taylah Tsitsikronis and Chelsea Forkin, resulting in the opening run of the tournament.