A Passion for Japan: Introduction

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A Passion for Japan

A PASSION FOR JAPAN

John Rucynski

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Introduction

John Rucynski

As the title implies, this is a book about having a passion for Japan. But what does that mean exactly? There is certainly no shortage of English-language books devoted to the increasing global fascination with all things Japanese, from anime to manga to sushi. What makes this book different is that it is a collection of personal narratives by long-term residents of Japan who describe how a passion for some particular aspect of Japan or Japanese culture helped with the acculturation process and enriched their lives. This is not a book about being a Japanese culture *otaku* or marveling at how cool and quirky Japan is (although there are hints of that as well). This is a book about the journey from simply living in Japan to actually calling Japan *home*. But let me start with how this theme came about.

In over 20 years of living in Japan, the question I have been asked most often by Japanese people is, "Why did you come to Japan?" This question is so ubiquitous that a television program with that very name—"Youは何しに日本へ？" (*Yū wa nani shi ni Nippon e?*)—has been broadcast on TV Tokyo since 2013. It is such a common conversation starter that I liken it to how giant basketball player Shaquille O'Neal must feel when asked, "How tall are you?"[1] I often stress to students in my university English language courses that, at least when it comes to *long-term* foreign residents of Japan, a more appropriate question might be, "Why have you *stayed* in Japan?"

Even if this more suitable question is asked, however, the same generic answers tend to come up. The wonderful food culture. The fascinating blend of traditional and modern. The clean and punctual

public transportation. The public order and lack of violent crime. The health care system. The fact that beer at baseball stadiums is cheaper than back home (well, maybe that's just my personal, American answer). This book started as a personal quest to find a deeper answer to "Why have you stayed in Japan?" and I invited 30 fellow long-term residents to share their personal stories.

One of my favorite Japanese words has always been *ikigai* (生き甲斐). It is often translated as "a reason for being," but I prefer the translation "why I get up in the morning." Yes, the food here is amazing. But, as much as I love them, sushi and yakitori are not the reasons I get up in the morning. To survive and *thrive* in a foreign country, we need something deeper. We need something that makes us say not merely, "I like living in Japan," but also "I *belong* here." We need something that makes us not just say, "I live in Japan," but "Japan is my *home*." This collection of personal narratives reveals many different ways that a diverse group of people from a wide range of countries have made Japan much more than just a temporary home.

Let's face it, Japan (or any foreign country as an expat) isn't paradise for everyone. The rollercoaster ride of living abroad can feel like heaven and hell, both on the same day. In *The Roads to Sata*, Alan Booth's classic account of his walk across the length of Japan in the 1970s, he recounts "days I began in the foulest moods and ended laughing, or days I woke up feeling perfectly at ease and went to bed wanting nothing more frantically than to leave Japan on the first flight out."[2] Most contributors to this volume have no doubt experienced similar emotions. In conversations over the years, countless fellow expatriates have told me that Japan started out for them (as it did for me) as a "one- or two-year adventure." The adventure ended there for many, but for others it has become a decades-long journey. Each of the authors of the chapters of this book has a different reason why.

On a trip home to the States one year, I struck up a conversation with someone at a bar, whom I presume had never lived abroad. "Japan, huh? You must be like a big fish in a small pond," he remarked after I told him where I live and what I do. That offhand comment has stuck with me over the years, not because there isn't some truth to it, but because of how it fails to capture the bigger picture. Yes, foreigners do sometimes stick out in Japan (although a lot less these

days). And some may even embrace that. But I sincerely believe that a great majority of long-term residents of Japan will tell you that being "special" just for being a foreigner gets old fast. Living in Japan is a challenging process of, in fact, trying *not* to stick out while trying to *fit in*. Karen Hill Anton, the author of Chapter 1, talked about balancing sticking out and fitting in in her memoir, *The View From Breast Pocket Mountain*: "I would stand out in Japan, always. But I could also fit in."[3]

Living in a foreign country can be a paradoxical existence. On the one hand, the "exotic" newness of the foreign culture can be exhilarating, transforming the mundane into the magical. This has been called the "honeymoon stage" in the progression through culture shock. On the other hand, some of my own most powerful cross-cultural experiences have been when "culture" or "nationality" are stripped away, leaving just a *human* experience. One of these transformative moments occurred in Tokyo in 2000 when I went to a concert by Phish, a band whose live performances had provided the soundtrack for my university days in the US. Considering that I had never met a single Japanese person who knew of this American band with a relatively small but loyal following on the other side of the Pacific, I was surprised to walk into the venue and find a capacity crowd that was almost completely Japanese. Cheering, dancing (if you can call it that), and chatting with my fellow "aphishianados" that night, I quickly felt any sense of American-ness or Japanese-ness evaporate. Cultural differences were trumped by a shared experience and passion for the music.

My experience at this concert could also be said to exemplify a prominent construct of Japanese culture, that of *uchi* (内, literally "inside") versus *soto* (外, "outside"). Japan is sometimes described as an exclusionist country and culture, where it is difficult for "outsiders" to gain access to an "inner circle." Japanese may belong to several inner circles, including family, work groups, and people who share similar interests. For foreigners, however, becoming part of an inner circle can be more difficult, due to the language barrier or any number of cultural differences. It is far from impossible, however; indeed becoming an insider, and how doing so opens up worlds that outsiders may never glimpse, is a central theme in several of this book's chapters. Gaining access to inner circles as a foreigner in Japan can make one feel like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, when

everything changes from black-and-white to color. You are no longer bound to the formality that pervades Japanese society. You can let your hair down. You can have less formal, more fun, conversations, and forge deeper relationships. There may not be a magic key for opening the door to inner circles in Japan, but sharing a passion with Japanese people is one of the best strategies. Sharing my passion for Phish at that concert in Tokyo, I was instantly *uchi*, a member of an inner circle of thousands of other Phish fans in attendance. The feeling of unity and fellowship was wonderful!

Returning to the stages of culture shock, the "honeymoon" stage is said to be followed by the "frustration" stage, the "adjustment" stage, and the "acceptance" stage. Although this model surely has some truth to it, I would argue that it is overly simplistic, as it is simply not true for everyone, and there is great variation in how long individuals take to move from one stage to the next. Sadly, some people who move to a foreign country may never experience the honeymoon stage. Even more sadly, I have encountered more than a few foreign residents in Japan who seem to be perennially stuck in the frustration and adjustment stages. Why? Is it a lack of proficiency in the Japanese language? Not all of the contributors to this book are fluent in Japanese. Is it due to the vast gap between low-context and high-context cultures?[4] A majority of contributors have come to "high-context" Japan from "low-context" cultures and have managed to adapt to this difference. Or is it simply a matter of whether a person finds an *ikigai* in Japan? All the contributors to this book have clearly found an *ikigai*, a passion—or multiple *ikigai* and passions—a reason to get up in the morning.

The journey from honeymoon to acceptance, and further, to thriving, can be a long and trying one. Even after 20 years in Japan, I'm often inspired by those who manage not only to survive, but to thrive in their cross-cultural adventures. Regarding the need to always welcome new challenges, David Goggins, author of *Can't Hurt Me: Master Your Mind and Defy the Odds*, writes: "Always be willing to embrace ignorance and become the idiot in the classroom again, because that is the only way to expand your body of knowledge and body of work. It's the only way to expand your mind."[5] That also sums up pretty well the challenge of living in a foreign country. Speaking a new language knowing that you're bound to make many mistakes. Working in a new environment where you may be

uncertain whether those around you are glad you're there or merely tolerating you. Being the only foreign student in a class learning a traditional art with a thousand-year history. Embracing temporary ignorance to pursue an interest when you don't know where it will lead.

As I searched for a more satisfactory answer to the question of why some people stay in Japan while others leave, why some "graduate" to the acceptance stage while others drop out, one word that kept coming up was "passion." Those who, long after first arriving, were living happily in Japan almost all seemed to have found things in Japanese culture that they not only accepted, but *embraced*. They had found an *ikigai*. As detailed in many of the chapters that follow, following their passion also often involved a fair amount of *gaman*: perseverance, or putting up with things that you're not especially crazy about. Despite my own love for life in Japan, there are certain aspects of Japanese culture that I will never completely accept. But that doesn't make it any different from the culture of my home country.

Over the years, I have been fortunate to have many other experiences like my transformative one at that Phish concert in Tokyo 20-plus years ago. One of the places I often feel most *at home* in Japan is Koshien Stadium, cheering on the Hanshin Tigers baseball team. Sure, I may get occasional comments like "Oh look, even that foreign guy likes the Tigers," but once the game starts, I simply blend in with my local community. I'm no longer "that American guy who likes the Tigers too." I'm just another fan who knows the words to all the cheer songs. I'm the guy with the Kanemoto (former Tigers slugger Tomoaki Kanemoto) jersey who likes to sit along the third base line. I am merely one of hundreds of thousands long-suffering Tigers fans wondering why we haven't won the Japan Series since 1985! In other words, I'm part of the inner circle of Hanshin Tigers fans.

Now, you may be thinking, "Baseball? That not Japanese culture!" It's true that baseball is called "America's pastime," but Japan has also made it its own. In Robert Whiting's book about foreign baseball players in Japan, *You Gotta Have Wa*, a former Major Leaguer is quoted as saying, "What they play in Japan isn't baseball. It just looks like baseball."[6] While this comment was meant to be derogatory, I prefer to put a positive spin on it. It's *not* baseball—it's *yakyū* (the

Japanese word for baseball, 野球). The rules are (mostly) the same, but the strategies used, the cheering style, and the stadium snacks are uniquely Japanese. These first struck me as odd, but now I feel just as at home (more so, actually) cheering for the Tigers at Koshien as I do cheering for the Boston Red Sox at Fenway Park.

Another passion that has helped me to embrace life in Japan is hiking. Now, it wouldn't seem that there is anything particularly Japanese about hiking, but when you hike in Japan you are having a Japanese experience. My personal *pawā supotto* ("power spot") has long been the Kumano Kodō (熊野古道), a series of ancient pilgrimage trails stretching through Wakayama, Nara, and Mie Prefectures. When I am hiking there, I am hiking for the mental and physical benefits, just as I would in my home country, or any country in the world. But on the Kumano Kodō, I am also passing temples and shrines that were originally built nearly a thousand years ago. I am stopping to appreciate the small O-jizō-san stone statues—Jizō (地蔵) is a Buddhist guardian deity of children and travelers—found along many hiking paths in Japan. Whereas striking up a conversation with a stranger sitting next to you on a commuter train is unheard of, I greet (and am greeted by) every passing hiker (another in-group?) with a friendly *konnichi wa* and perhaps some small talk about the weather or how many times we have walked this course. After my hike, I soak in natural hot springs with complete strangers. And when I check in to my *minshuku* (family-operated traditional inn), I am no longer greeted apprehensively with questions like "Can you speak Japanese?" or "Can you eat Japanese food?" but rather with *ohisashiburi* ("Long time, no see!").

The editor recharging at Kumano Nachi Taisha shrine, with Nachi Falls in the background, on the Kumano Kodō in Wakayama Prefecture.

My point here is that there are a lot of different things one can develop a passion for in Japan. Some people find their passion in an aspect of culture that is originally Japanese. Others find their passion in something that historically passed through several other cultures before becoming an integral part of Japanese culture. Others bring a passion with them to Japan, and then embrace the Japanese version of it. All of the above are represented in the chapters of this book. What the chapters have in common is that their authors all found a passion here that greatly assisted them in getting through the acculturation process and/or has deeply enriched their lives. That passion, whatever form it takes, has helped them make Japan *home*.

When I posted an open call for submissions for this volume in the fall of 2021, I was pleasantly surprised by two things. The first was the number of potential contributors who said, "I've wanted to write something about this for a long time." It has been a pleasure and a privilege to offer a home for so many fascinating personal narratives.

The second surprise was the impressive variety of passions people described in their chapter proposals. My personal nightmare as editor for this book would have been getting a ton of proposals about a narrow range of topics, anime for example. While I certainly would have welcomed proposals about anime, my hope was for variety, and the results far exceeded expectations. Rather than reveal all the

topics and themes here, I'll let readers discover them on their own, but let me assure you that there is a little of everything.

So, finally, who is this book for and what is it about? I am confident that it will make enjoyable reading for both long-term residents of Japan and readers who have never set foot in this country. And I am also confident that even those who have lived in Japan for decades, including Japanese readers, will learn many new things about this country—I certainly have! What is it about? It's about Japan. It's about the struggles and successes of living in Japan, or in any foreign country. And it's about living with passion.

I hope you enjoy reading this book as much as I have enjoyed editing it.

Notes

1. Answer: For years Shaquille O'Neal was listed on the official NBA website as being 7 feet, 1 inch (216 centimeters) tall. But in a 2022 interview, he admitted, "I'm not 7'11", I'm 6'11" (211 cm). I just played like I was 7'1".
2. Alan Booth, *The Roads to Sata: A 2000-Mile Walk Through Japan* (Tokyo, Kodansha Globe, 1997).
3. Karen Hill Anton, *The View From Breast Pocket Mountain: A Memoir* (Hamamatsu: Senyume Press, 2020).
4. In high-context cultures (like China or Japan), nonverbal communication plays a more important role than in low-context cultures (like the UK or the US), where communication tends to be more direct and explicit. For a deeper analysis, see Edward T. Hall, *Beyond Culture* (New York: Anchor Books, 1977).
5. David Goggins, *Can't Hurt Me: Master Your Mind and Defy the Odds* (Carson City, NV, 2018).
6. Robert Whiting, *You Gotta Have Wa* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989).