

# The Three Important Dimensions of “ Studying in Japan ”

1. The Merit of Studying Japanese
2. What to Learn in Japan? and
3. The Merit to Learn in Japan.

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## <Key Words>

merits studying Japanese stockpile center of information key to open the door  
possible contribution the new world order decision making

## Abstract

It is important for the International Student Center and for Japanese teachers to be able to answer three questions with confidence these are 1) What is the merit of studying Japanese? 2) What to learn in Japan? and lastly 3) The merit to learning in Japan. It seems that the merit to studying Japanese is to get the key to the information treasure island in the world. Japan has many valuable social systems which may contribute to the new world order based on United Nations. Japan is a unique country where safety and basic virtues such as honesty, cleanliness and punctuality are still well kept. There are enough merits to study in Japan and Japanese.

留学生センターや日本語教師にとって、次のような質問に明確な回答を持っていることは基本的に重要である。すなわち1) 日本語を勉強するメリットは何か? 2) 日本で何を学べるのか?そして、3) 日本という場所で学ぶメリット、である。1)については、日本が世界有数の情報集積基地であること、その情報が日本語で集積していることから、日本語を学ぶことで、情報の宝庫の鍵を手に入れることになる。2)に関しては、冷戦後の国連中心主義の新秩序の中で、従来のアングロ・サクソン・ルールがうまく機能していないように見えるが、各地で頻発する宗教や民族問題がらみの紛争に、日本社会に集積されて来たさまざまな知恵が、その解決に貢献する可能性が高いのではないか。端的な例として、日本式の面子を重んじる決定方式を挙げた。3)に関しては、比較的安定した評価が既に存在しているように見える。

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## Preface

In relation to the international students in Japan the Japanese government maintain the basic policy to increase and keep the total number of such students at around 100,000 from 1983 when Mr. Nakasone was the prime minister. This number, 100,000 is reported to follow the approximate number of international students in France.

Since then the number of international students had increased steadily from around 10,000 to 50,000 in 1993. At the level of 50,000 the number has ceased to increase and stayed at the same level till now. The reasons raised to explain this phenomenon were mainly as follows:

- 1) Japanese "economic miracles" faded away which discourages international students.
- 2) Japanese daily living costs are too high for international students, particularly for those from neighboring Asian countries.
- 3) Japanese is too different and difficult language and its usage is limited to Japan.

In other words, without good explanations on the following three major questions to study in Japan it will be difficult to increase international students in Japan, which may end up with national demerits in the long run for international relations.

- 1) What is the merit of learning Japanese?
- 2) What can international students study in Japan?

And

- 3) What is the merit to study in Japan?

It is quite likely that the first contact of those who wish to learn in Japan is the teacher of Japanese. It is, thus, very important that Japanese language teachers have clear idea or answers to these questions. From my various discussions with these Japanese teachers it is my impression that most of them have only slight ideas or even have not thought about these questions. It is from this situation that I think it will be worthwhile to explain my own ideas which derived very much from my experience of working worldwide.

# I. The Merit of Learning Japanese Language

## 1. Japan as the Stockpile Center of Information

1-1. It seems to me that Japan is an unusual stockpile center for information of any kind with easy access. There are many evidences of this. Followings are some examples of situations which I believe to prove such theory.

- 1) Most of the important developments of a company are only possible after consultation and approval of the concerned authorities. And the first and basic way to promote negotiation with the authorities is to give them enough information, domestic and international. Since such authorities demand all the related information we are very much accustomed to collecting information in full.
- 2) A similar thing happens with any delegation at the conference, domestic or international. It is most important for the delegate that s/he holds the complete process of the meeting, which forces the delegate to keep full or good record of the meeting.
- 3) Because of the consensus style of decision making in the Japanese society, the information collected is immediately reported and disclosed to the concerned parties. It is often the case that more the information is important the more it is distributed. This is apparently one of the reasons that in Japan it is virtually impossible to keep secrets.
- 4) Another apparent reason that important information is equally held among Japanese companies in the very severe competitive situation which still exists here. When I was the general manager of a big financial company I was always pressed to keep enough information on our major competitors. We used to form an information exchange meeting among us and the meeting was regularly held. It is the place we exchanged secrets to the competitors. Strangely, the more severe the competition becomes the more we were forced to exchange secrets. This situation, of course, contributed a lot to quickly elevate the technical and structural level of Japanese industries.

1-2. I have seen many opposite cases in other countries.

- 1) In U.K. or U.S.A. people tend to hide the important information at their desk and hesitate to disclose it unless they are sure that such disclosure will be a benefit. It is often very difficult to find the necessary information. We should find someone or

some kind of professional who knows where the information is.

- 2) In other countries, it is often the case that nobody seems to know the exact situation. Some countries officially announced to invite foreign investments with some special conditions. We had many difficult times to find who knows the conditions. It seemed that such conditions seemed not to exist.
- 3) It has been the case that the easiest place to get the total picture of a certain country is the Japanese embassy or Japanese companies active there. It is very difficult to get such information from any person or organization which has only some particular information but not the whole. It has given me the impression that those people and organizations are not trained to keep whole situation. In Japan, not only managers but even new staff are constantly requested to try to get the whole picture of what is happening and when s/he cannot explain about it it is taken as his/her shame.

One typical case I encountered in Manhattan is symbolic. I tried to swim at the YMCA pool. Nobody was not sure if I could or not. They were all nice people and made a great discussion. Eventually I was allowed to swim. At the poolside I was asked to have a cap. The guard kindly showed me the way to the nearest shop, a few blocks away. When I was going out I found a little shop where they sell caps. The shop was only 10 meters away from the pool. Everybody was so nice, but the information is not well shared. This kind of thing never or rarely happens in Japan. I had the strong impression that this is a kind of country where information can be sold. It is very difficult to sell information in Japan because most of the information are commonly shared. It is strongly felt as a shame if one does not have certain information. This is one of the reasons that people tend to stick to their group to maintain access to the newest information.

1-3. Japan can be thought of as the Treasure Island of Information. It is not only over every sector but in complete shape. "Perfectionism" is one of the problems of Japanese bureaucracy. This perfectionism is well extended to every sector of Japanese society. Thus any information should be in a perfect shape. This means you should be ready to answer any questions on the theme. If you cannot it is the case that there is no answer in this world.

It is indeed this accumulation of information from all over the world, its complete shape and its common sharing that promoted the recovery of Japan from the country of mere ash after the WWII. In this sense Japan has been heading the already popular IT,

(information technology) revolution.

1-4. The problem of Japanese accumulated information is that it is kept in Japanese, one of the most difficult languages in the world. All such information is well shared by Japanese people but not internationally. In fact, this language barrier worked as the strong protection so as not to be leaked out and used from outside of Japan. Vast information of quality and quantity with very easy access has been shut out to the other part of the world and kept unnoticed. The information has been used only by the people who understand Japanese, in most cases it has been the Japanese people. This situation, it seems to me, indicates the real merits of learning the Japanese language.

## 2. The Merit of Learning Japanese

2-1. The most simple and straightforward way to utilize this vast information center is to use Japanese and be in the Japanese group. But to master Japanese to that extent is not easy and to be accepted as a member of a Japanese group is not simple either. It seems that the framework of a workable solution might be roughly as follows:

- 1) The information can be utilized more comfortably by the people of the areas which have close historical and geographical relation with Japan, which is Asia. Other countries like Brazil where there are many Japanese descendants can be another possibility.
- 2) Level of Japanese must be good enough to communicate daily conversation and to do business. Speaking the local language is always the best and shortest way to create friendship there.
- 3) It should be emphasized that s/he must be accepted in the particular community. Once accepted as the member all the information in the group will be open to her/him.

2-2. It is, of course, worthwhile trying to study Japanese to full fluency. In fact Japanese is the second top foreign language learnt in the world only after English. Once you get that fluency, and welcomed in Japanese society, you will have a lot of opportunities in business or other areas of activities in relation with Japan. Many wealthy groups in Asia have used this kind of opportunity and have succeeded to utilize Japanese information, Japanese technology and Japanese products. They then

gradually localized production and marketing with constant contact with Japan. The Japanese language has always functioned as the important method of communication in the process, since most of the managers in Japan have not spoken English well.

2-3. The second merit of learning Japanese is that once you are accepted as a member of a certain group, you are privileged to be treated as the member of the group everywhere in the world. Your "meishi", name card, will qualify you to the immediate access to the information they have in the area. This does not happen in the European or American companies, where employees move from one company to another and the relation among the employees are very competitive.

This privilege often continues even when you leave the group to be independent in your own country. You will continue to be treated as a member and you can fully utilize these relations for your business or others. This is, in fact, a typical case in Asia for many success stories.

2-4. It may still be very difficult to climb to the top of Japanese organization for foreign people. It is because of difficulty to understand all the details of Japanese management systems. In other words, it is the difficulty to be Japanese.

It is also not necessarily too attractive to work and wait a long time to be selected to the top of a Japanese organization. Because Japanese society being very much similar to socialism, the total remuneration is not much different either at the top management or not.

This is why most of the people who learnt Japanese eventually go back to their own country or become independent keeping good relation with the Japanese groups they came from.

2-5. Probably it is worthwhile noticing where information is mostly accumulated in Japan. It is, first of all, at the central government offices, secondly in major international companies.

Japan is still very much a socialistic country in its basic social structure. There exists a strong controlling center where the best brains of the country are collected which forms very strong bureaucratic power. They are the only groups who know and control all the cobweb regulations and controls.

The basic role of directors and managers of big companies is to keep good contact with the controlling authorities. They are constantly furnishing the authorities with the newest information so as to promote new business and to get the approval to do so. My

personal guess is that the real "think tank" in Japan is actually the central government itself. There are many private think tanks in Japan but their ability to collect real and important information may be far behind such governmental organizations.

## II. What to Learn in Japan?

### II-1. Japan's Possible Contribution in the New World Order

II-1-1. After the east-west confrontation, the cold-war, ended, the major structure to keep world peace seems to be the activities based on the United Nations. The UN activities have long been based very much on Anglo-Saxon ideas. Everybody thought that since the cold-war ended the world will be more peaceful but it has not been the case. Many wars erupted all over the world. Because the cold-war ended peoples were released from the dominant pressure of America and Soviet-Russia. Long covered local problems resurfaced and the conflicts turned into a war.

II-1-2. Major reasons of such wars seem to stem from the differences of religions, races, classes and casts and mixture of these elements. All these elements are very difficult to deal with. It seems to me that in the new world order "the wisdom accumulated in the Japanese society" would work effectively. Japanese society has been putting emphasis on the consensus decision system, which means to minimize the dissatisfaction among the related groups. Particularly each "face" has been tried to be saved. Many cases of wars seem to stem from this "face" problem. Large group or small group, all of them wish to be respected and treated with respect.

II-1-3. In Japanese proverbs there is one which reads as "Even a robber has his reasons". This means that everybody has his own excuses and reasons, so we should be ready to listen to their explanations. Otherwise problems will be never solved. Japan being a small country with relatively dense population and scarce natural resources people tend to avoid quarrels as much as possible. In order to pursue this aim Japanese people used to use many social techniques and tactics. These methods



should work in the world new order, once they are refined and purified as to be used internationally and to keep the world peace. This could be the good target of study in Japan.

II-1-4. From my own experience to have worked in Europe, Asia, America and Japan, American rules seem to be relatively simple. European rules are more complicated, but they are still simpler than Japanese rules. American rules are great. They are clear, simple and easy to understand. This is very important in the country where a nation is consisted of many original nationalities. But if this American rules will have another elements such as ones existing in the old society like Japan they should improve their strength.

## II-2. Examples of Difference of Decision Making

II-2-1. One of the examples of difference in decision making is the length of time consumed at the preparative stage. In Japan, as a first step, related information is carefully distributed among all the concerned parties. This stage is considered very important. Documents are carefully prepared so as all the parties can understand what is being presented and the distribution of the documents is made as widely as possible. This is to avoid the future possible confusion that somebody will claim that he was not informed. This is the reason that within the group all the information and secrets are well shared. But, because the secrets are open in the group, such secrets are rather strictly kept out from the outsiders.

II-2-2. All the problems are then carefully examined and sorted out. Then many possible solutions will be examined one by one with constant consultation with the concerned parties. Most of the initiatives are taken by authorities, local or central. Since authorities have been regarded for long time as clear and clever, neutral and fair, the final proposal from them have been mostly accepted. This belief in authority seems to be based on the tradition of trust on Samurai class in the Edo era. In fact, the Meiji government, which was the first modern government in Japan, consisted of young Samurais. Since then, central government has been dominated by sort-of-Samurai spirit, spirit dedicated to the welfare of the people.

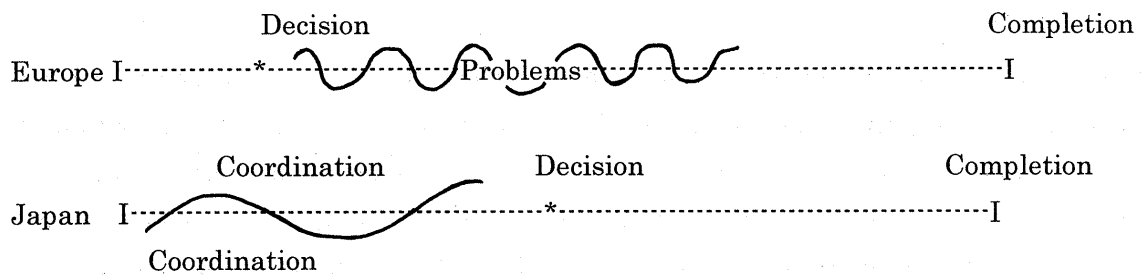
II-2-3. Once the decision is made, all the procedures will proceed smoothly. It is

because that the decision is widely supported and/or agreed. Most of the schedules are kept and the plan is completed in time.

My experience in Europe and America was different. The decision is quite quickly made but the trouble starts there. Plans change, materials do not arrive, schedules are not kept. For the Japanese such a process looks chaotic.

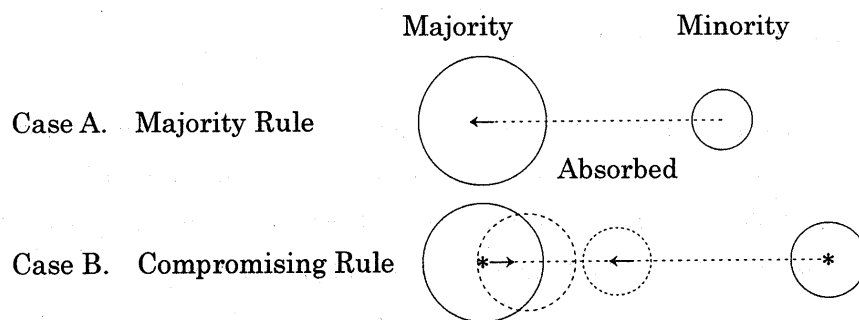
II-2-4. The end result seems not too different. Japanese way or European or American way, the plan will finally be accomplished. But the important thing here is the total amount of satisfaction of the people or groups concerned. I had the impression that Japanese way of doing things seems to fit for the new world where so many different elements should be counted on.

(Fig. 1)



II-2-5. Another example of difference of decision making is shown below as figure 2.

(Fig. 2)



Case A is the so called the "majority rule", which means majority wins in the decision making and the minority will be absorbed to the majority.

On the other hand, case B is the "compromising situation". Even a majority will move a little, while a minority should move more depending on their difference of gravity. Most of the decision in Japan takes B case. The difference between A and B seems not

too much, but the philosophy is very different, accepting compromise or not.

In the new world order, it may be more important to consider the stand point of the minority groups and to compromise with them.

### III. The Merit to Learn in Japan

III-1. The merits may be divided in two. One is the basic merit to learn abroad. This is not limited to Japan. To learn anywhere in a different place is something worthwhile. We learn a lot simply being there. Many differences are found. It is in the history and tradition, the way of living and thinking. We learn there are many things and different people in the world.

III-2. The merit of learning in Japan seems to be fairly clear and seems to be commonly shared among the international students. In many researches, they say the followings as the good points of Japan, at least at present.

- 1) Japan is clean country. Cities and roads, buildings are well organized and clean.
- 2) Japanese people are honest. It is rare to be deceived, foreigners can take the words as they are.
- 3) Japanese people work hard. They really work very hard. Maybe too hard.
- 4) Japanese people keep time and try to keep their promise. It is great to be able to trust people.
- 5) Japan is very safe. I can walk by myself at midnight.

The points raised above are themselves great things. They are not easy to find in the world. So, it is worthwhile to study in the country with such virtue.

III-3. But there are certainly many difficulties to studying in Japan. The international students quote the following as their difficulties.

- 1) Cost of living is too high.
- 2) Japanese is too difficult.
- 3) Japanese society is closed and not accepting of other people.

- 4) Very difficult to find job after graduation.
- 5) Housing accommodation is generally poor in its size, facility and distance.
- 6) It is very hard to find good home stay family and the privacy is not very well kept there, etc.

The Japanese language problem was dealt with at the beginning. The other major point to be considered may be the openness of this country.

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