

What aspects of Japanese culture (other than hammering the nail) do you disagree with?



Scott Kerwin, lived in Japan (1992-1997)

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I recently visited Japan for the first time in 22 years and I had the pleasure of meeting a foreigner who has lived there for 40 years, raising 8 children all of whom attended Japanese schools. I asked her a similar question and she answered, "The othering." By this she meant the Japanese tendency to keep foreigners at a distance.

Even though she had been there 40 years and speaks Japanese fluently, she mentioned walking into a shop and seeing the look of discomfort at the salesperson fearing they would have to speak English. She wouldn't visit the onsen near where she lived because they were unaccustomed to foreigners and she didn't want to deal with the stares and the comments in Japanese.

I lived there 5 years. I reached my expiration date and I left. One of the reasons was that I got tired of feeling like I was a piece of sand inside an oyster, each year adding a new layer to wall me off. Even as my understanding of the language and culture deepened I felt that I was treated as if I had just arrived and knew nothing about Japan. Expectations were minimal, and while that may sound appealing, that's simply not appropriate for serious students of a culture.

But "othering" is what makes the Japanese unique and keeps them that way. It's ironic that after my experience I am vocal opponent of immigration in Japan. I do not want to see it become a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic state. There are enough of these in the world already, and I am proud as an American to belong to one. But I don't believe it's in Japan's best interest to throw open the doors and accept a flood of foreigners.

So unlike the famous Japanese *katana*, "othering" is a double-edged sword. It is an absolute pain to experience first hand, yet it is what makes Japan a unique and interesting society. Maybe I'm selfish but I don't want to see that character lost.



At Asakusa Shrine, Oct 2019 (source: author)

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