

II. People and Culture

1. Is Japan an Isolated Island Nation?

The Japanese are conscious of the fact that their nation is an island and one which is separated from other countries. Therefore, they believe they have created a unique culture and this has formed a society with a strong inclination for "in-groups" which they have named "an island nation mentality". Quite a few Japanese believe that the culture created by this environment is difficult for foreigners to understand. Many of the questions put to visiting foreigners deliberately seek to confirm the disorientation those foreigners feel in Japan and the difficulty they have in adapting to Japanese customs and mores.

In fact, however, Japanese history cannot be isolated from the outside world. At the root of Japanese culture is deeply entrenched culture from China and Korea. If traced even further back links with India and South East Asia are revealed. During the modern era Japan came under the influence of the materialistic culture of Europe and the Japanese were soon devoring the new civilization eagerly. The result was the multi-layered culture unique to Japan, as the Japanese absorb new civilizations relatively easily. Even during the period when Japan isolated itself from the rest of the world, it was not completely cut off. The curiosity of the Japanese was already flourishing.

There are only a few physical or spiritual elements in the lifestyle of the average Japanese today which can claim to be peculiarly Japanese. If the Japanese were to emphasize a unique feature of their culture it would be its extreme variety as a result of swallowing so much that is foreign. In every period of Japanese history there have been foreign catch phrases, words which have been borrowed from abroad or adapted into Japanese and the Japanese have always enjoyed using these. With the even greater commercialism of today, everywhere is flooded with words from abroad and we have entered an era when the Japanese vocabulary which foreigners find the most difficult to understand is "Japanized" English. We can say that what makes Japanese culture unique is its motley nature. This Japanese-Western-Sino blend is Japanese culture itself.

2. A Homogeneous Nation

There are no official population statistics according to race in Japan. Nearly the whole population is made up of a single ethnic group, the Japanese, so there has been no necessity for statistics to be divided according to race. Thus the ethnic

composition of foreigners residing in Japan can only be projected from nationality. As shown in the table below, foreign nationals accounted for less than 1% of the total 124 million population.

Table 2. Largest Twelve Foreign Nationalities Residing in Japan (1990)

Total 984,455			
Korea	687,940	UK	10,206
China	150,339	Thailand	6,724
Brazil	56,429	Vietnam	6,233
Philippines	49,092	Canada	4,909
USA	38,364	Malaysia	4,683
Peru	10,279	Germany	3,606

Source: Judicial System and Research Department, Minister's Secretariat, Ministry of Justice

The majority of foreign nationals residing in Japan are nationals of former colonies or their descendants mainly Korean. Most people holding Japanese nationality are ethnic Japanese with a minority of ethnic Koreans and Chinese, plus a few Ainu (about 30,000), who are thought to be the earlier inhabitants of the northern regions of Japan. The numbers of these ethnic minorities are not clear from the Population Census but they can only account for a very small percentage. Japanese is the only national language so Japan is a very uniform country both ethnically and linguistically. As a result, the existence of ethnic minorities in Japan is often ignored and the absolute majority, the ethnic Japanese, often forget that they themselves created the minorities in their country.

Although almost the entire population is ethnic Japanese, there was no single language understood equally well by the whole population in Japan before modernization. For such a small country the regional differences in language were great. Then the Meiji government created standard Japanese and put a great deal of effort into establishing it as the common language, thereby creating a nation in which information was diffused at all levels in one language. During the process the Ainu language was wiped out, the role of the regional dialects was reduced and by the end of the nineteenth century the number of people using a standardized form of Japanese had increased even in the Ryukyu Island language areas (as noted later some academics classify this language as being different to Japanese). The success of Japanese modernization policies owes much to the creation of a monolingual society.

However it is very easy for a people, who believe that the promotion of uniformity itself is modernization, to misunderstand multi-cultural, multi-racial

and multi-lingual societies. When Japan colonized the Korean Peninsula, it cannot be disputed that its ban on the use of the Korean language and insistence on Japanized surnames engendered resistance at the deepest levels amongst the Korean population. Whenever a nation expands its political control over other countries it inevitably imposes its culture on them, but the Japanese went to extremes. This can be partially explained by Japan's hurry to modernize and catch up with the western powers, but it was also due to the Japanese having understood mixed societies insufficiently. Similarly, the rapid influx of foreign workers in the 1980's is seen as a threat to the "uniformity" of Japan and the problem is being discussed in cultural rather than economic terms.

3. Eastern and Western Cultural Differences

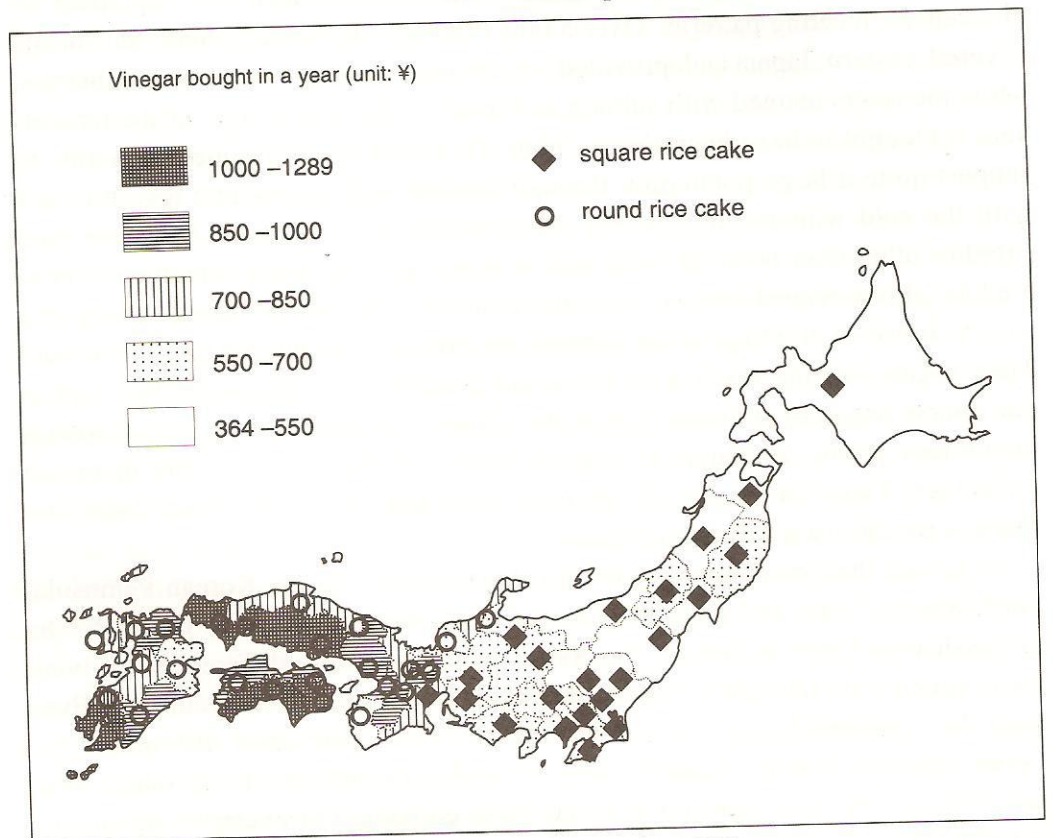
The cultural differences between eastern and western Japan are explained by differences in eating patterns. Over 5,000 years ago deciduous broad-leaf forests covered eastern Japan and provided an abundant harvest of nuts and berries, while the rivers teemed with salmon and trout so the food supply of the inhabitants is thought to have been fairly stable. This kind of environment was able to support quite a large population through hunting and fishing and this, together with the cold winters, delayed the development of agriculture. However food supplies other than potatoes were scarce in the western areas, which were covered by glossy-leaved forests, and this imposed limits on the development of a society based on hunting, so the inhabitants turned to producing their own food. They began clearing the forests early and practiced shifting cultivation and in due course began to cultivate rice on the plains. The scarcity of primeval forests in western Japan compared to eastern Japan can be traced to this historical difference. Today the center of rice cultivation has moved to eastern Japan but this is a recent historical development.

It is said that the lifestyle in eastern Japan resembles the Korean Peninsula, northeastern China and parts of Siberia, while western Japan is linked to the glossy-leaved forest culture of the Asian continent. These differences in living environments are thought to have appeared as differences in food cultures. Even with the regulated large food supplies of today there are great differences between east and west in the color, strength and consumption of soy sauce, *miso* and vinegar, the basic seasonings in Japanese cooking. For example, flavors are usually strong in Tokyo while they are more delicate in Kyoto. Many people in the northeastern regions like salt which is known to cause the high death rate

from strokes in these regions. Vinegar consumption is higher in the west than in the east. A look at noodle preferences shows that the easterners like *soba* (buckwheat) while the westerners prefer *udon* (wheat), and at New Year the easterners put square shaped rice cakes into their *zoni* (soup with rice cakes and vegetables) while the westerners use round ones.

There are also great differences between east and west in traditional building styles and language. For example, the way in which living space is divided in traditional houses differs. Houses in the Tohoku and Hokuriku regions stand out with their large rooms and few partitions, while living space south of the Kanto region is more often divided into smaller square rooms. However, today these

Chart 9. Map of Cultural Differences: Differences in Vinegar Consumption and the Shape of Rice Cake



Source: Asahi Encyclopedia, World Geography 5, Asahi Shimbun, 1986

regional differences are fading as everyday Japanese life becomes more Westernized, craftsmen skilled in traditional techniques are becoming scarcer and building materials have changed greatly.

In contrast, however, the regional differences in language are as great as ever and there are cases of people being unable to communicate with one another when using their respective regional languages. In particular, the language of the Ryukyu Islands is very different from the mainland languages (Kyushu, Shikoku, Honshu and Hokkaido). On the mainland, too, there are great differences in accent and intonation and in the vocabulary used in the various regions of Kyushu, Kinki and Tohoku, so great that people cannot understand one another unless they use "standard Japanese". Some people claim that Japan can be divided into two broad language regions by a boundary through central Japan. For those who speak Tokyo Japanese, however, the Japanese spoken in the Kinki area which is west of the boundary is easier to understand than that spoken in the Tohoku region, although the latter is their neighbor geographically and would be classified as being in the same area linguistically. Clearly a regional classification of the Japanese language is difficult.