



A Language Tour of Japan

Wenfang Tang
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In late July and early August of 2017, we took a 10-day tour of Japan. Our group consisted of 6 faculty members from the University of Iowa. The trip was sponsored by the Japan Foundation. The purpose of the trip was to make us more aware of Japanese culture so we can include Japanese elements in our future teaching and research. My expectation wasn't high. Until the trip ended, I didn't expect to learn anything to fundamentally change my view of Japan in 10 days.

I received the itinerary before we departed. One of the first things we would do was to visit the Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo, where the war criminals were worshipped. I was instinctively resistant to such a visit as a native Chinese. Yet I was reluctant to announce my boycott because I didn't want other people to think that I was making a big fuss about nothing, since most of the other members of our group didn't grow up with the same constant reminder of Japan's war crimes in China during World War II as I did. I was caught in a moral dilemma.

One of the first things I noticed in Japan was actually about our own group. The 6 of us were originally from 4 countries, the U.S., Spain, South Korea, and China. We spoke four different languages, English, Spanish, Korean and Mandarin Chinese. I took such diversity for granted in the U.S., partly because we all worked at the same university where you saw people from all over the world all the time. We became a very noticeable group in Japan where there was a

relatively high degree of ethnic homogeneity, particularly when we went to the rural areas on the Shikoku Island.



As we traveled through Japan, I became very interested in Japanese language. I found it very easy to travel in Japan, particularly if you knew Chinese and English. It's true that I couldn't understand any spoken Japanese, but there were Chinese characters (kanji) everywhere we turned. Most of the public signs are in kanji, including hospitals, government offices, museums, advertisements, and the names of places, people and stores. I could find an address without any problem, although in theory I didn't know a word of

Japanese.

料金表 Admission fee		常設展 Permanent Exhibition	特別展 Special Exhibition 戦国！井伊直虎から 勇敢へ	共通券 常設展+特別展 Joint Ticket
		個人 one person	個人 one person	個人 one person
一般	Adults	600	1,350	1,560
65歳以上	Ages 65 and over	300	680	780
大学生 専門学校生	University Students including Vocational College Students	480	1,080	1,240
高校生	High School Students	300	680	780
中学生(都外)	Junior high school students (Outside of Tokyo)	300	無料 charge-free	300 (常設展の料金のみ)
中学生 小学生	Junior high school students (Elements of Tokyo) Elementary school students	無料 charge-free (無料チケットもお返しいたします)	無料 charge-free	無料 charge-free
未就学児	Children Under Elementary School Age	無料 charge-free		

Of course, not all the kanji used in Japanese are still used in contemporary Chinese, such as 案内 (information), 無料 (free of charge), 駅 (train station), etc. But it won't take too much effort for a Chinese speaker to remember the meanings of these words. In addition, there are a lot of English words used in Japanese, such as boyfriend, girlfriend, orange juice, and so on. It wouldn't be an

exaggeration to say that at least 50% of the vocabulary in Japanese are either kanji or English.

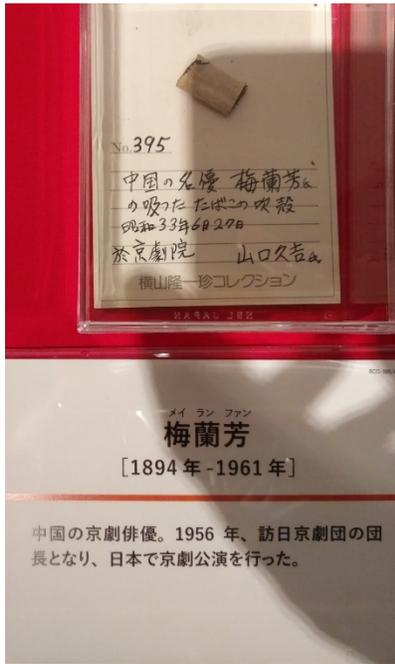


Our group leader Professor Kendall Heitzman was an expert on Japanese literature. He told me that Japanese newspapers typically used about 3000 kanji characters. So you can assume that that's about the number of Chinese characters an educated Japanese can read and write. These are more than enough for a Chinese and a Japanese to communicate by writing, even though they may not understand each other when they speak.

This is very different from Korea and Vietnam. Both countries used Chinese characters in their official documents until the mid-19th century.

They later abolished Chinese characters and replaced them with their own writing systems. Today, Koreans and Vietnamese can no longer read Chinese characters, even though a large number of Chinese vocabulary is still used in their spoken languages. In Japan, people use kanji

every day and the kanji-based calligraphy is still very popular. In fact, it was a joy to appreciate the beautiful calligraphy everywhere when I traveled in Japan.



Chinese influence in Japanese culture became even more visible as we toured further into Japanese history. Our itinerary included many such historical sites, including temples, museums, and art galleries. There were a large amount of paintings, poems, documents, and personal letters by well-known historical figures, all written with brushes in Chinese. I could read and understand a lot of them. My sense of cultural superiority was growing, as I repeatedly saw how much China contributed to the development of Japanese culture.

As the trip continued, my cultural pride diminished quickly. I learned that China borrowed heavily from Japanese language since the Meiji Restoration. When Japan learned Western ideas, Japanese scholars translated and expressed them in Chinese characters. These phrases were then easily adopted by Chinese scholars and introduced into modern Chinese language. For example, if you conduct a search under “phrases that came from Japan” in the Chinese search engine of Baidu, a large number of

Chinese phrases would come up, such as train, telephone, television, organization, machinery, Christianity, technology, and so on. In fact, it may be true that the entire vocabulary of natural sciences, medical science, and social sciences in the modern Chinese language were introduced from Japan after Japan learned the terminologies from the West and used kanji to translate them.

In terms of social sciences, China imported many terms from Japan, such as democracy, freedom, cadre, police, lawyer, ism, and so on. These terms are widely used in today’s Chinese social science academic writing. Because they were written in Chinese characters, these words were introduced easily and the Chinese never thought about it twice. Many Chinese, including myself, perhaps thought these phrases originated in China and were later borrowed by Japanese, like what Japan did many centuries ago. But that’s a false conception.



Actually, Japan made important contribution in the development of Modern Chinese language. Such contribution should be recognized and appreciated. Yet this is a fact that is difficult for some Chinese to accept, particularly those who feel China’s cultural superiority over Japan.

The same can be said about Japan. Japan achieved great development after learning from the West in the late 19th century, while China was falling behind.

When Japan saw China’s backwardness, it developed its own sense of cultural arrogance and the greed to conquer China. When such ambition was

defeated, Japan refused to apologize and such stubbornness deeply hurt the feelings of the Chinese people.

I was relieved when I heard that our originally scheduled visit to the Yasukuni Shrine was canceled. Instead, we were taken to the Peace Museum in Osaka. The theme of the exhibitions was how Osaka was bombed indiscriminately by the U.S. during the WWII and how many innocent people were killed, but there was no mention of the important role of Osaka as the military factory and the war crimes by Japan.

We were told that the museum was built by the Osaka government that was democratically elected by the local people. In this sense, the democratic electoral system in Japan plays the role of facilitating the rise of right wing nationalism.



The rise of the right-wing nationalism in Japan is facing the rise of Chinese patriotism. The confrontation between the two countries seems to be unavoidable. Perhaps the tension could be reduced if the two sides can see how the two countries benefited from each other historically, and how the two cultures share incestuous ties. Perhaps such understanding will bring some positive energy in dealing with each other.