

Enculturation and Socialization via Language Acquisition in Japan

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Japanese culture has historically and traditionally been very hard to fully grasp and understand for most foreigners. Learning to speak, read, and write fluently in Japanese is the best path to successful enculturation and socialization into Japanese culture.

For much of its early modern history, Japan has been more or less closed off to the rest of the world. From 1603 to 1868, under direction of the Tokugawa Shogunate, Japan was placed under an isolationist foreign policy known as “Sakoku”, (lit., ‘chained country’). While in place, this system barred any foreign national from entering Japan for any length of time and also forbade any Japanese nationals from leaving the country. Trade still flourished at only the specific ports allowed, however, and the Japanese were able to be exposed in small doses to other cultures – particularly Chinese culture in the form of a written alphabet that the Japanese would later adopt and alter to become what we now know as Kanji. Dutch culture in the form of medical, scientific, and technological knowledge was also introduced in small doses. Aside from this, early modern Japanese culture would develop entirely within the borders of Japan as a closed country.

This “Sakoku” sentimentality can still be seen in smaller portions even today; during the COVID-19 pandemic, Japan enacted a widely criticized draconian border policy that barred anyone not of Japanese citizenship ingress to/egress from the country. Some have speculated that this is a result of engrained xenophobia as a result of Japan being a mostly homogenous society for a vast majority of its existence. This policy, however, was recently lifted in October 2022 after being in force for nearly three years. During this time, though, foreigners within Japan (both

long-term residents alongside students and businesspeople) were treated as if they were solely responsible for the spread of COVID-19, with some reports even surfacing of restaurants and shops discriminating against non-Japanese people and refusing entry or service.

Almost assuredly a side-effect of the “Sakoku” sentimentality and historical homogeneity of Japan is the concept of “Uchi-Soto”. In very simple terms, Uchi-Soto is the distinction of “in-groups” (uchi) and “out-groups” (soto) in Japanese culture. This distinction between in-groups and out-groups is a fundamental part of Japanese social custom and sociolinguistics and is even engrained within the Japanese language itself. Typically, in Japanese language the in-group is humbled while the out-group is honored from the perspective of the speaker. For instance, the Japanese verb “to give” has multiple translations. From the perspective of the receiver, “to give” is あげる (ageru), and from the perspective of the receiver, it is くれる (kureru). This constant determination of who comprises the “in-group” and the “out-group” relative to the speaker has no doubt led to discrimination in many cases, though sometimes inadvertently. A Japanese speaker may glance at a very obviously non-Japanese foreigner while in Japan and assume that the individual does not know any Japanese and thus may be reluctant to speak with them. This can lead to barriers in communication and socialization for many living in Japan.

The Uchi-Soto concept can be seen in many social situations in Japan. Within the workplace, at school, and even on public transit, the Uchi-Soto concept is a constant companion for most Japanese people. In public transit, for instance, there is a phenomenon known as the ‘gaijin ghost seat’. Gaijin means “outsider” or “foreigner” in Japanese and is a blanket term for anyone not born in Japan and of Japanese descent. Even if the trains are crowded, the seat next to a foreigner will almost always be empty without fail. In some cases, it can be due to a Japanese person’s perceived lack of a foreigner’s social etiquette or even due to preconceived notions that

“gaijin” are dirty or that they are too loud. At any rate, this is nonetheless a direct result of the Uchi-Soto concept; the foreigner sitting on the train has been judged at a glance. Oftentimes, people (particularly foreigners) are typified in the Uchi-Soto concept due to their skin tone, hair color and type, clothing type, sexual identity, gender identity, language ability, ethnicity, geographical region, and especially age. All these socioeconomic factors play a role in the Uchi-Soto concept and, while this concept cannot be overcome simply by learning to speak, read, or write Japanese, it certainly can’t be overcome without an active, working knowledge of Japanese language either.

When it comes to overcoming the Uchi-Soto concept, there is no foolproof way of achieving this. Learning how to speak, read, and write the language is most often the best way to begin attempting to overcome this concept. As mentioned before, a Japanese person may glance at a foreigner and be reluctant to converse with them due to a preconceived notion that the foreigner likely does not speak Japanese. Even upon speaking Japanese to a Japanese person, it can be a little difficult to gain their trust that you do, indeed, understand their language and converse with them in it. While this does not remove the label of “outsider” from the foreigner, it at least allows them further access into Japanese culture and social aspects by way of communication. This barrier is incredibly difficult to overcome without the ability to communicate in a meaningful way.

In urban areas of Japan, or in popular tourist destinations like Tokyo, Kyoto, Osaka and the like, there is a higher concentration of language diversity both in spoken and written forms. Signage in these places is often in multiple languages (typically Japanese, Chinese, Korean, and English), and there are bound to be staff at local establishments that at the very least understand enough of a few of these languages to facilitate basic communication like ordering and serving

food or giving directions. Japan is heavily reliant upon tourism, so a lot of these facilities are streamlined for ease of use by non-Japanese speakers. Purchasing train tickets, ordering food, reporting allergies to restaurant staff, finding your way, checking into and out of hotels, and even hailing a cab are relatively easy to do without any prior knowledge of Japanese.

Doing these things in and of themselves, however, does not necessarily offer further insight into Japanese culture in the way that being a Japanese speaker could. Being able to order a bowl of ramen at a local family-owned ramen shop off of a menu with pictures as opposed to being able to hold a conversation with the chef about the sourcing of ingredients or the likely family heirloom-esque, decades-old recipe for the crispy pork belly atop your bowl of ramen are two very different things; one simply allows a brief glimpse into surface level Japanese culinary culture, while the other allows the foreigner direct insight into a staple of modern Japanese culture from not only a native speaker, but from the unique perspective of a ramen chef that just can't be obtained elsewhere.

While these things are able to be done for the most part by non-Japanese speakers in city centers, the further away you get from both the city centers and from typical tourist interactions, the harder it is to get by without a working knowledge of the Japanese language. In more rural areas, signage mostly shows up only in Japanese (though sometimes freeways or major highways will oftentimes have English as well), and the language diversity in more rural areas goes down. You'll find less and less speakers of other languages and mostly speakers of proper Japanese as well as the local dialect, of which Japan has many. In the daily activities of a long-term resident of Japan, things are not as cut and dry as pointing to a picture on a menu or a place of interest on a map. Going to the doctor, acquiring and paying for housing, obtaining insurance, paying utilities, and setting up a bank account all require the ability to speak, read, and/or write in

Japanese, especially when it comes to reading hiragana, katakana, and kanji. The more time one spends in Japan, the more kanji they'll need to know how to read to be able to get to the correct places. Some of these service providers mentioned earlier do offer intermediary translation services, so these things technically can be achieved without the ability to speak Japanese, but the need to use an intermediary can also be viewed as yet another barrier between the foreigner and Japanese culture.

Upon entering the workforce or the classroom, a foreigner will immediately find themselves subject to the Uchi-Soto concept discussed earlier in this essay. A large part of Japanese culture, and thus the Uchi-Soto concept, is conformity. An old Japanese proverb states that "the nail that sticks out gets hammered down." This concept is especially true of foreigners, and even more so if the individual is unable to communicate in Japanese whilst employed or studying in Japan. The individual is already othered for their status as a foreigner, and thus a barrier already exists between them and Japanese culture in this sense. The lack of knowledge of the Japanese language further builds upon this barrier. Given that this concept is even applied to native members of Japanese society and native Japanese speakers, learning how to speak, read, and/or write Japanese is almost a prerequisite to dismantling these barriers between the individual and Japanese culture.

When it comes to how a new Japanese language learner perceives Japanese culture as opposed to how a fluent native Japanese speaker perceives Japanese culture, the differences are clear and abundant. As a part of this research, I interviewed two individuals; the first is a new Japanese language learner who has only visited Japan once named Elizabeth. The second is a bilingual fluent native Japanese speaker named Tony who was born in the US, but later moved to Japan and lived there for 25 years.

I asked Elizabeth about her awareness of the Uchi-Soto concept and whether or not she has experienced it before. She said that she had, and that the further out from the major cities she got, the more like an outsider she felt. She was unable to effectively communicate with shopkeepers, train station attendants, or restaurant staff. Her response in full is as follows: “I’ve heard of [the Uchi-Soto concept] a little bit. You and I talked about it before we visited. It doesn’t impact me much here in America, but I’d say it impacted me in a pretty negative way when we visited Japan. I felt like an outsider anytime we left a major city like Tokyo or Kyoto. They have English menus and signs there, and typically people could speak English well enough for me to communicate with them. There were also a lot of other foreigners there, so I didn’t stick out quite as much. When we would go to smaller places like Uji, I couldn’t read the menus or the signs and I had to rely on you to order my food and to check us into hotels and stuff. I could tell that there is a clear divide on people who are either native Japanese, people who are just visiting, and people who are not native Japanese but who have lived there for an extended period of time.”

Tony’s experience with the Uchi-Soto concept was unique as well. As a Japanese man who grew up speaking both English and Japanese, he developed a slight American English accent while speaking Japanese and that was enough for native Japanese speakers in Japan to know that he was not, in their terms, a “true Japanese”, and was thus had the “outsider” label thrust upon him when conversing with Japanese speakers in Japan. Despite this, Tony grew up in a Japanese household immersed in Japanese culture; his ability to speak Japanese in the US did not have much of an impact on this, but his speaking ability was a large part of him assimilating into Japanese culture upon moving there.

In the US, Tony is a Japanese teacher, and is very up-front with his students about Japanese culture as it actually is as opposed to how it is portrayed in the media or by social media influencers. In his interview, I asked Tony how he talks about the Uchi-Soto concept to his students. He responded, “I go right into it, no holds barred. Japanese culture, as you know, is a really tough nut to crack. In some ways, you can’t blame Japanese people today for being so closed-off to those that they deem outsiders for whatever reasons they may have for doing so. Japanese culture relies heavily on tradition, so people often tend to do things how their parents did them; so on so forth back and back generations at a time, and you still have remnants of things that in other less traditional societies would maybe have died out by now. Uchi/soto is one of those things, I think, but it’s more of a cultural phenomenon in general than an individual one. It just exists nebulously in Japanese culture as a sort of feature, and it permeates all levels of it. From what school you go to or where you work, down to the people you associate with in those various places, even down to your family as a unit. There are layers to it, and I try my best to make sure my students know that typically, it is nothing personal. It’s a stubbornly persistent relic of bygone eras that has somehow retained its hold via the Japanese desire to conform.”

In conclusion, the best way to successfully enculturate, assimilate, and to become fully socialized within Japanese culture is by learning how to speak, read, and write Japanese. Given that Japanese culture remains so incredibly hard to access or assimilate into compared to most other modern cultures, coupled with the fact that Japanese culture relies heavily upon Japanese as a spoken and written language as a means of communication, one has to first succeed at learning how to effectively speak with native Japanese speakers, and be able to sufficiently recognize, read, and write symbols in three separate alphabets (hiragana, katakana, and kanji) in order for enculturation and socialization to happen successfully.