

**What Japanese Exchange Students think about Japanese Culture and Identity (2008)**  
(translations by Peter Ackermann)

Fukai Satoka, July 10, 2008

**1. What is Japanese culture?**

The word "Japan" usually arouses associations like cherry blossom or samurai. These are things that are easily visible. However, here I would like to touch upon aspects that are not so easily noticed from the outside.

The most outstanding trait of Japanese culture in recent years, we can say, is "communicating by cell phone." A cell phone is no longer just an object; I see it as one part of Japanese culture.

In the second half of the 1980s cell phones were so big you could compare them to boxes as large as a 1.5 litre pet bottle hung from the shoulder. Today they fit into the palm of the hand. When I was in the 6th class of elementary school my mother bought me my first cell phone. It had letters (characters) made of (some kind of) inorganic substance arranged on a yellowish green screen. Today, a coloured screen would be taken for granted, a camera would be included, and there would be access to the internet. Unbelievable that in not even 10 years such changes have occurred.

Now let us ask why a mere "thing" like a cell phone should be called "Japanese Culture." The first point to make is simply that a huge number of people possess one. Statistics say that for every 6 persons there are 5 cell phones. I am a typical case, getting my cell phone when I passed from Lower Secondary School (9th school year) to High School (10th school year). However, nowadays there are many Elementary School kids who have a cell phone; this is for security reasons.

The second point, besides the sheer number of cell phone owners, is the fact that an extremely large amount of time is spent in contact with a cell phone. This is particularly true for young people. It must not be forgotten that in recent times cell phones are also used to read novels (so called "cell phone novels"), and the number of people who use them to form social networks is increasing too.

These developments have led to social problems like "*pake death*." "*Pake death*" refers

to "packet payment" for ever more intense usage of the cell phone as a means to be in the internet, and to the fact that the high costs for the amount of time spent in the internet have become a serious problem for those who cannot afford it and die (e.g. no longer take proper meals or live in decent apartments). Also, there are great numbers of sites distributing "nuisance mails" or seeking to obtain money by fraud.

## **2. What aspects of culture have disappeared?**

What I hold to be a disappearing part of Japanese culture are contacts among neighbours. I felt this the moment I became a university student and started living alone. Fifteen people were living in the same apartment house, but I hardly knew the face of the person living next door. When by chance we pass each other in the parking lot there is no greeting, and when we bump into each other at the entrance we exchange just a very slight nod. I can't tell whether the same thing is true of other apartment houses, but what I heard from my friends one almost never becomes acquainted with one's neighbours.

I don't think this is true merely for students. Presumably it's the same thing for families as well.

Formerly, i.e. for about 30 years after the end of the war, I think exchange among neighbours was intensive. I was not born yet at that time, so I'm not entirely certain, but by what my parents and grandparents told me or what I read in books, neighbourly contacts must have been very intimate. I heard, for instance, that if one had run out of *miso* (soybean paste to make soups) or *shōyu* (soy sauce) one went to ask the neighbours whether they could help out. That is inconceivable nowadays. Also, formerly, *susowake* (sharing) of foodstuffs (after having received some as a present) was common among neighbours, so I heard.

I believe that the decrease of communication between neighbours has to do with the increase of nuclear families. It used to be normal for three generations to live together in families that had been at the same place since former times. In the house you were born in, already your parents and grandparents had cultivated close ties. As long as you did not move away, this pattern was continued from generation to generation. However, nowadays the number of nuclear families is increasing, and father and mother rent or buy a new house and (live there) with their children, thereby "jumping" into new

surroundings. Here there will be no one you have known for a long time, and all contacts with neighbours have to be built up from scratch. These factors probably carry considerable weight when considering why neighbourhood relations have become so much weaker than they used to be.

To sum up: I think that there is a connection between the decrease of contacts with one's neighbours and the increase in importance of cell phones. The fact that so much time is spent using the cell phone implies that a person is alone for such a large extent of time. That is not only true for the cell phone, but for all kinds of technological equipment for providing information such as the personal computer, but along with the progress of the information society we see the advance of a tendency to contact merely those we expressly choose as (communication) partners. As a result of building an environment suiting our own desires we set up barricades that shut out those we have no direct wish to communicate with. Nowadays, communication partners are only specially selected persons, or (invisible others) with whom no face-to-face conversation takes place, as we merely send out endless strings of information from our personal computer.

Thanks to the spread of the cell phone and the development of the personal computer we are easily able to obtain information. This has made life convenient and comfortable. On the other hand, however, long-standing relationships among neighbours were given up. As one part of this development we must also not forget the fact that communication within one and the same family has diminished; indeed there are families whose members, although they live under the same roof, no longer meet face to face.

### **3. What cultural elements have remained a fixed part of tradition?**

This point I would like to consider quite apart from the two topics discussed above. One of the patterns of behaviour that baffles foreigners when they first come to Japan is *rei* [translatable as "etiquette, proper polite behaviour, being courteous"], i.e. (above all) *o-jigi* (bowing).

You can see people speaking at the telephone while humbly bowing away in spite of the fact that the person spoken to of course cannot see this. Evidently this behaviour appears extremely queer to foreigners. I myself had never taken note of this until told (by a foreigner). Coming to think of it, everybody in my family keeps on bowing when they are speaking at the telephone.

At school, before classes begin, (we are given the instruction): *kiritsu – rei*! (Stand up! Bow!). Also when we see someone we know while walking along the street we make a light *eshaku* (a slight nod). In hotels and department stores the personnel bows and says *irasshaimase!* (you are welcome!). In all kinds of places and situations in Japan this pattern of behaviour can be seen.

Also in *kendô* or *jûdô*, before a match begins and again after one has ended, always a signal of *rei* is given, and this is done all over the world.

Hardly had I arrived in Germany - I think it was on the third day – a German friend took me to see people practicing *kendô*. I am ashamed to admit it, but in Japan I had never been to a *kendô* class, and I had absolutely no idea what I was going to see. It turned out to be the most bizarre sight of Germans being taught *kendô* by Japanese.

What I kept hearing during this *kendô* practice was the word *rei*. I was very surprised, especially as this word was Japanese, not German. I asked my friend about this afterwards, and she said that practically no one who comes to learn *kendô* has any knowledge of Japanese. So I was really astonished to find that the Japanese pattern of behaviour called *rei*, together with the Japanese word *rei*, had come to be used (in Germany). This made me feel happy.

In Japan, *rei* plays an extremely important role. *Rei* is used to greet people, and *rei* is used in situations conveying a sense of apology. In Japan, no matter how polite an apology may be worded, if it is not accompanied by the bodily movement of *rei* the mere words alone will not carry the necessary weight.

I hold this culture of *rei* to be something we can take pride in, world-wide. Seen through the eyes of foreigners it may look like submissiveness and an exaggerated lack of self-confidence, or as an expression of modesty. However, by performing *rei* we are able to express what we have in our mind through bodily action. Moreover, (*rei* also marks) a clear beginning and a clear end of something.

### Summary

1. The first topic I touched upon, the cell phone, can be very generally applied to the

(lifestyle of) young people. Here in Germany I do not feel this so much, but at home in Japan, if by chance I forget to take my cell phone along with me, I am fidgety and restless for the whole day. When I was a pupil at the middle (lower secondary) school, I did not have a cell phone, and this caused no further problem for me. Now, however, the cell phone is a firm part of my life; in fact – and I am not exaggerating - it forms the centre of my life. I cannot think of my life without a cell phone.

2. The second topic I touched upon, (the lack of communication in the neighbourhood), I did not feel much as long as I lived at home. In the region where I hail from, even today there exists what is called *jōkai* (regular meeting), i.e. the meeting of the people who form a village section or a district at festival times or for funerals. However, when I asked my parents about these meetings they said that the interpersonal relationships were not as close as they had once been. Contacts between neighbours diminish as one gets nearer to the large cities. As mentioned, I see a possible reason for this in the development of the nuclear family and the (so-called) information society.

It also must be pointed out that the recent increase of (fear of) brutality and crime in Japan has contributed to weakening of neighbourly ties.

Until quite recently, Japan was known as a safe and secure country. However, I no longer feel that this can be said generally. True, theft or shoplifting may still occur less often than in other countries. However, in recent times brutal cases of murder are happening at an alarming rate. Unbelievable acts of crime are committed, such as indiscriminate stabbing and killing, or cutting up murdered bodies and eliminating the bits in the forest. Under such social circumstances you no longer know whom to trust. Therefore a mentality begins to grow based on the notion, "your own body can be protected by (no one else than) yourself!" At the same people (begin to) withdraw into their own shell and sever contacts with the outside. Thus the vicious circle is closed. Accordingly, the once more open neighbourly relationships have gradually begun to disappear.

3. As to the third topic, *rei*, it was originally an element shaped by Confucianism, but at the same time it is probably no exaggeration to speak of it as "Japanese culture." For me, *rei* is a cultural trait of Japan to be proud of, and one which I hope will never be lost, one that definitely will never disappear from Japan. This culture of *rei* is something Japan could not live without, and it plays an outstandingly important role. As I said before,

bodily movement referred to as *rei* contains complex meanings such as recognizing someone (i.e. greeting), or thanking, or apologizing, and it is also a precise marker of the start and ending of things. In some companies, the angle of *rei* (here meaning "bowing") determines the degree of gratitude.

### **Am I a typical Japanese?**

After considering these three points I felt that I was a typical Japanese. Though I have never gone so far as to envisage "*pake* death," it is a fact that I have spent large sums of money to pay for telephone bills. At such moments I come to realise how heavily my life had been dependent on the cell phone.

As for (the lack of) neighbourly relations, I felt this keenly when I began to live alone. In my mind I saw a connection between the lack of neighbourly relations and the (increase of) nuclear families and present-day social developments. I personally feel the latter to be the possible cause why I didn't bother much about (neighbourly) relations.

Finally, *rei* has been carved into my body since I was a small child, and I make use of it quite unconsciously. In fact, I only realised the existence of Japanese bodily movement called *rei* after going abroad.

Reflecting upon Japan I came to realise that I had never given a thought about being "inside" (Japan) until I was forced to think about it once I was "outside." At the same time I felt conscious of how very typically Japanese I was. Japan, though originally having introduced Chinese and Korean culture, eventually arranged these into a specific culture of its own, into something that is unique. Behind the development of this Japanese culture, and in the new type of society that this Japanese culture brought forth, there are both positive and negative sides. I am deeply interested in the question which material things and which types of behaviour formed Japan. This time I myself as a Japanese reflected upon Japan; but I would also be extremely interested in how foreigners see Japan.

Kanayama Mayumi, July 2008

## **'Japan' and 'Germany,' 'Asia' and 'Europe'**

### **1. How do I see myself as a Japanese?**

I am a Japanese. I am proud to be a Japanese. When I was in Japan, I never gave a thought to the fact that I was Japanese. I also did not perceive anything that would make me feel "proud". As I am from Osaka, I did feel proud of coming from this city. Everyone is a member of the same people, so no one needed to feel proud of this. I assume that, quite generally, the Japanese who live in Japan have never thought about being Japanese. After leaving my country, for the first time I was able to see Japan through different eyes. I became aware of being Japanese, and that I was fond of Japan. But that does not necessarily mean that I hold Japan to be a "good" country. Naturally, Japan has many negative sides and lots of problems. However, as I was brought up there, my identity is made up of the Japanese traditions and customs. So when I came to Germany and into contact with another culture, I felt for the first time that I was Japanese. Also, I think that we should deal with our problems and correct our negative points. That feeling derives from the fact I am fond of my country.

### **2. What is Germany to me?**

Germany, to me, is a factor that sparked my potential to see Japan through different eyes. Until I came to Germany, I had only lived among Japanese and had never been aware of Japan.

Seen from the point of view of a Japanese I think Germans are stubborn. They try by all means to pursue their own opinion. In Japan, we may need to learn more about logical thinking, but I do not see anything positive about not acknowledging one's errors. When I lived in Japan I had the image of Germans being diligent and reliable. This is a biased view of the Germans that is typical in Japan. Once I came to Germany, I began to feel that that image was not necessarily correct. On the other hand, sometimes I find Germans smart. For instance, when they address things directly in situations where a Japanese, by contrast, would prefer not to discuss a subject.

### **3. How do I wish that the Germans see Japan?**

If possible, I wish that they do not look at Japan as "Asia," but as "Japan." My experience tells me that Germans and other Europeans think of Asians above all as Chinese. When someone talks to me on the street it is mostly as if I were Chinese. I

suppose nothing can be done about the fact that they can't tell the difference between Chinese and Japanese. Also, I sense a slight discrimination against Asia. After having spoken to me (for instance, after calling out *ni hau* to me in Chinese), almost everyone produces a derisive smile. That is disagreeable.

#### **4. What is Europe to me?**

Certainly there are all kinds of problems, but personally I am envious of Europe. Though Europe consists of many different countries, they are making efforts to become one, and I find it good how they seek common profit. Japan, for instance, does not look at Asia; it is always fixed on imitating the West (i.e. Europe and America). This is not necessarily something bad, but in the face of this fact I find Europe admirable.

#### **5. Is Japan part of Asia?**

Originally I thought Japan was part of Asia, because geographically it lies in that part of the world. However, then I began to ask myself whether that was really true. Japan does not have its attention fixed so much on Asia than on the West. We can still strongly note Japan's will to Westernize. I therefore have come to conclude that Japan is not part of Asia. However, after reaching this conclusion I don't feel comfortable with it. Maybe that's my Japanese character. Now that I am in Germany, when I meet people from Asia I feel somewhat at ease, and, as I noticed, compared to people from other parts of the world it is easier to talk to and find common emotions with people from Asia. Seen from this angle, perhaps it can indeed be said that Japanese are Asians.

However, it's really a very difficult question to answer. This is because I don't really know what "Asia" designates. Unlike Europe, the different countries of Asia do not use the same writing system. Also the linguistic structures as well as their historical (experiences) are totally diverse. I cannot tell how far these factors carry weight, but I think it is very difficult to talk about "Asia" the same way as one talks, in an encompassing way, about "Europe".

#### **6. What is a typical Japanese?**

When I am asked what I thought was a typical Japanese, I first answer like this: Japanese look inward. Though it is said that Japan introduced all kinds of cultures from abroad in a flexible way, I see this as the mere pursuit of fashions.

It is said that Japanese easily get scared. Being alone is scary. But being too close to

others is also scary. Japanese love to gather. And they don't utter their opinion. They hate being forced to have an opinion and finally come up with a compromise. It looks as if they were taking the other person's (opinion) seriously, but I think this is nothing more than just being afraid that others might dislike you.

### **7. What is a typical Asian?**

I can't give an answer to this question, because I don't grasp what "Asia" really stands for. Moreover, Japanese - myself included - don't know much about Asian people. The information we get in Japan is mostly limited to information about the West. My own opinion is that Asia is a place being dragged along by the West. Perhaps you can say that Asia is forced to accept Western practices and Western standards - for instance, eating dog meat is said to be uncivilized etc. I don't think that Asians are basically aware of being "Asian." So it would be difficult to look for points they might have in common.

### **8. Am I personally a typical Japanese?**

If I am to be taken as an example, yes, I am a typical Japanese. I hate being by myself. After coming to Germany I learned to express my own opinion - I was in a surrounding where I had no option but to do so, so you could say that I conformed. But when I lived in Japan I did not put forward my opinion strongly, because the circle is more important than I myself personally. Well, that's surely because I am scared of being left alone.

### **9. Am I a typical Asian?**

As I don't know what a typical Asian is I can't answer this question. What I can say is that I never really thought of myself as "Asian." Answering these questions took an enormous amount of time. Perhaps that is the answer.

Maruta Eri, July 2008

## 'Japan' and 'Germany,' 'Asia' and 'Europe'

### 1. What is Japan to me?

I have almost never reflected upon being Japanese. In Japan, we can say that nearly everybody is Japanese. The chances of encountering foreigners are practically zero. Yet the only time you suddenly realise this fact, I think, is at big events such as the Olympics or the World Cup.

However, when living in Germany you can't help noticing that you yourself are different from the Germans around you. Whether you like it or not, you become aware of this. And then, strangely, as you walk along and people call out *ni hau*, thinking you are Chinese, you begin to feel angry. "No! I am Japanese!" I would like to say. Not that I have a particular patriotic love for Japan (*aikokushin*) – at least that's what I thought, and yet...

I often thought, "No, Japan is really no good." I don't really know about countries beyond the sea (i.e. foreign countries), but somehow I thought them to be terrific. I wanted to go to Germany as soon as possible! So I came here as an exchange student. That is ten months ago... So now I do sometimes think about Japan, and I have also discovered Japan's good sides.

For exchange students from other countries, Japan surely is an unknown place. When I came to Germany, people asked me all sorts of things. I felt happy that people showed an interest in Japan and wanted to know more about the country. In my language class, a Japanese friend gave a little presentation on the Japanese language. Obviously, the students from other countries were extremely surprised at what they heard, and I myself began to reconsider the characteristics of Japanese, and for the first time felt pride at being a speaker of such a unique language. "Being different" was fascinating.

There was something inside me that made me feel I was "Japan." I began to take note of the fact that I could not separate myself from this (*suterarena*), and it would be with me all my life.

### 2. What is Asia to me?

As long as I lived in Japan, obviously I never thought of myself as "Asian." Japanese are

Japanese, not Asians. I still tend strongly to feel this way, but if you begin to make groupings such as "Europeans" or "Americans", then of course Japanese become "Asians."

I think I became aware of this term ("Asians") for the first time after I had come to Germany. In Europe we have the EU, languages in Europe have certain things in common, and there is a common currency. And, of course, the individual countries are really close to one another. Japan, however, is an island country, no other country uses the Japanese Yen, and neither does anyone else use Japanese. Japan is really a very unusual country, we could say. Living in such a country I ask myself whether it is not just impossible to feel being "Asian."

I can understand that Europeans see Japanese as belonging to (the category of) "Asian" peoples. However, I, personally, do not particularly like being called "Asian." I feel that when classifying somebody as "Asian" somehow that person is being looked down upon, being discriminated.

What countries does the word "Asian" altogether refer to? For me, "Asia" and "Southeast Asia" are two quite different things. China and South Korea (*kankoku*) are geographically near, people look similar, and I do in an sense feel we belong to the same group. However, countries like Vietnam, Thailand, the Philippines etc. are again something different to China and South Korea, and referring to all these countries just as "Asia" I feel is inappropriate and too generalising.

Also the image conveyed by the word "Asia" probably differs depending on whether seen through our eyes or through the eyes of "Europeans." For instance, in Japan, "Asian goods" are goods from Vietnam or Thailand, and if we say we are going to have "Asian food" certainly nobody will ever relate this to sushi. In Japan, the term "Asia" tends to refer to a place that is outside our own country.

### **Afterthoughts**

When Japanese hear the word "foreigners" the very first thing they think of are Americans. This in turn refers to people who speak English, to people who look different from us, typically having blue eyes and being blonde. Japanese cannot tell the difference between Americans, Germans, or French. "Europeans" are also "foreigners." However,

how about Chinese and South Koreans (*kankokujin*)? Perhaps only I feel that way, but they do not belong to the category of "foreigner." They are "Chinese" or "South Koreans." Although I said above that I hate it being lumped together into one category as "Asian," I cannot help feeling friendly closeness (*shitashimi*) (to other "Asians") in my language class.

Murakami Aya, July 2008

### **Japanese and Asian identity**

Sitting in front of my computer, I tried again and again to formulate my thoughts. Though I spent all day today searching for an opinion, I did not succeed in finding one and putting it together on paper in an orderly fashion. I really feel bad, and as a Japanese I feel great shame.

I did think of various aspects of identity, and I experienced culture shock, and I think I will be able to say something about it. But I have not gathered my thoughts so as to be able to put them in writing.

May I listen to the opinions of Germans and Japanese and then rethink the task of writing a paper?

Nakajima Marie July 4, 2008

#### **1a. What are Japanese?**

##### **The Four Seasons**

After coming to Germany, I often asked myself questions like "What are Japanese?" or "What makes up the Japanese character?" However, I still have not found an answer. The only think I am often made to think of is that I myself am Japanese.

I came to Germany in October (2007). In November, my family and friends sent me

messages and photographs of the red maple trees. Seeing these I was reminded of the beautiful Japanese autumn.

Then Christmas passed and New Year's time came – the end of the old year and the beginning of the new one. I felt a longing for *toshigoshi-soba* (noodles eaten on New Year's Eve), *zōni* (soup containing rice cakes eaten on New Year's Day), *o-sechi-ryōri* (dishes served at New Year) and *o-mochi* (rice-cakes). New Year may be very, very cold, but paying the First Visit to the Shrine in the New Year to express one's wishes was something I terribly missed.

In March and April, as we expect spring, cherry blossoms come out and scatter. I felt such a longing for the Japanese cherry blossoms. Then summer comes. It's hot, but everyone looks forward to the summer (shrine) festivals and summer fireworks. Wearing a light cotton *yukata*, time is spent merrily (laughing and singing). That is Japanese summer.

So, as season for season moves on, I thought of Japan, I felt a longing for Japan. At these moments I said to myself, "I am really Japanese."

Japan is a country of Four Seasons. Spring, summer, autumn and winter are part of a Japanese person's body, a natural part of a Japanese person's mind. Of course I was aware of the passing of the seasons while I was in Japan, but I never thought of this as "typically Japanese." Now that I am far away from Japan I feel the splendour of the Four Seasons in Japan all the more keenly.

The other day, in an internet questionnaire about what is nice in Japan, the Four Seasons were in position number one. Other entries were "serious and honest," or "diligent," but more important than that was the love for the Four Seasons and the pride one felt for them.

So whatever one has to say about the Japanese, one can certainly not omit the Four Seasons. The Japanese are a people who attach great importance to, and have a very keen sense for, the seasons.

### **Use of time**

I spoke of the Japanese being "serious and honest" and "diligent;" this makes me think

of a number of things. From a global perspective, this is almost always the way Japanese are seen. It is true that Japanese work longer than other people do, really terribly much longer. It is quite normal that one works on Sundays, and many shops are open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. When I came here to Germany, it seemed to me most inconvenient that almost all shops were closed on Sundays and public holidays.

Moreover, when I lived in Japan I jobbed, and so I was extremely busy every day. Most students in Japan go jobbing, and also nearly all of my friends were busy jobbing. Why is everybody so terribly busy? Of course we can say that they want to earn money. However, I think it is not only that. It seems to me that Japanese just enjoy being busy.

At first when I arrived in Germany I had absolutely no idea how I should make use of all the surplus time I had. Up until then my life had always been busy, every day. I didn't have much surplus time. But suddenly, when I arrived in Germany, I had absolutely nothing to do, and I well remember how I felt bewildered. In Germany, time passes slowly. I have now got used to this slow passing of time; I enjoy it and live a relaxed life. But when I return to Japan, that will certainly change. The difference of the flow of time between Germany and Japan (will be felt). Do you know the tale "Momo" by Michael Ende? It is a fantastic story about bringing back time someone has stolen, and I can't help thinking that Ende wrote this as a message to the Japanese.

I have strayed a bit from what I was talking about. When I came to Germany and I had no idea what to do with all that surplus time, I well remember how I said to myself, "What a nice thing it is to be busy." It was at this moment I realised that Japanese are busy because they like being busy. That is the reason they (concentrate) on their job and work hard. But of course, in present-day society, there are also many people who would like to take off and can't.

### **Being "international"**

Japan is an island country. When thinking about Japan this geographical aspect certainly plays a very important role. When I came to Germany, I thought how much the Japanese lacked a sense of internationalism. European countries are continental countries joined to one another, and there is a never-ending flow of people from different countries coming and going. Also, it is not that difficult to leave the country you are in. Especially since the EU was established, going abroad has become still very much easier. Every time I go on a trip abroad from here this fact really surprises me. For instance,

you get on a train. And in no time you realise you are in a different country, and signs can be seen that are no longer written in German. Such a thing is inconceivable in Japan. In Japan, if you want to go abroad you need to cross the sea. Crossing a national border in a car or a train is a weird experience, and to me, as someone born and brought up in Japan, this is an experience I can't get used to.

I still cannot really say what being Japanese means, but because Japan is an island country the feelings (I have just described) I see as really important.

There are still many answers that could be given to the question of what it means to be Japanese, but let me have the possibility to continue thinking.

### **1b. What are Asians?**

This is an even more difficult question than the first one. I just don't know what the term "Asia" really covers. I am almost certain that what Europeans think of as "Asia" and what Japanese think of as "Asia" are two totally different things. Europeans may understand Asia to mean everything that lies east of Europe, but that is not the Japanese perspective. If Japanese speak of Asia the countries that come to mind do not cover a particularly wide area; for instance, I personally think of China and South Korea. Even when taking a larger view I would think of countries as far as Thailand, i.e. South-East Asia. The Middle East or Turkey are very far away, and I feel uneasy about including these places in what is called Asia.

So it is extremely difficult to answer the question, "What are Asians?" I don't know what Asia is, and what Asians are. Maybe we could say that Asians are people of the yellow race, having black hair and black eyes, and who are often thin. Also, it is perhaps possible to say that Chinese and Japanese - and Koreans? - share the use of Chinese characters (*kanji*), or that there are certain similarities in the food culture. However, I cannot define what is Asian in view of the many differences in culture, language, currency, etc. But having said this doesn't mean that I am not aware of being Asian. However, this feeling of being Asian is, quite frankly, based almost completely on external appearance. In other words, when Westerners see me they can't tell whether I am Japanese, Chinese or Korean, so that is to me "being Asian." Also, in Europe there exists that large organisation called EU, but in Asia, unfortunately, thinking has not developed that far. Maybe that's why the sense of coherence is not as advanced as in Europe.

### **2a. Am I a typical Japanese?**

I don't know. But I can definitely say that, since I am now living abroad, I have become very aware of being Japanese. If asked to be more precise about this I am unable to make the point, but I can say that I am living in a country that is totally different in language and in culture to where I come from, and so I intensely think and feel about things that I never noticed in Japan. Through being aware of Japan I was made to become aware that I am Japanese.

### **2b. Am I a typical Asian?**

As I already said above, I cannot tell whether I am a typical Asian or not. Also, I don't know what area Asia is supposed to cover. If Asians are understood as people of the yellow race and with black hair and black eyes, then I am a typical Asian. When Europeans see me they definitely think I am Asian. However, I sense that the question posed aims at something different. At any rate, probably nobody knows what a typical Asian is.

### **3. Conclusion**

Once when sending a mail to a friend I wrote, "I have come to notice that something making me Japanese is deeply engraved in me. Though I can't express this clearly in words." The answer I received included the following passage:

"I am sure that one can concretely feel being Japanese. Moreover, speaking of Japanese, there are very many different kinds of (Japanese), and because you are in Germany you are full of thoughts about what the Japanese are, but if you were in Japan you would not think of what is "Japanese." You would think of the ways Kansai people or Kyoto people are distinct, and in the end you would arrive at yourself and think about what makes up you yourself."

Reading this answer I felt convinced. Putting this as a conclusion may not be what was expected from me, but the points I made I feel to be the most important ones. To my mind, these points need considering before anything else is said about Japanese or Asians. It is a fact that the person called "me" falls into the category of "Japanese" and "Asian." However, the smallest unit in this category is "I myself," and though I share many things and have common feelings with other Japanese and other Asians, there are

also many things that make up "myself" which I do not have in common and do not share with others. Rather than to define what Japanese or Asians are, I think it is important to reflect upon myself and to listen to the opinions of others.

Ogawa Yoshimi (-Maier) July 10, 2008

### **What does "Being Japanese" mean?**

#### **1. Being Japanese**

"To what category do I belong?" This is a question I unconsciously always carry around with me. People keep reflecting upon questions like, "Am I male or female? To what school do I belong? What profession do I have? What kind of family do I have? What is my financial status? Where do I live? What language do I speak? What nationality do I have?" When defining "myself" it is easier to make use of outward criteria than to start searching one's inner feelings. For that reason probably people tend to think mainly of outward criteria when reflecting upon their identity. I would like to add that, concerning one's inner feelings, the situation is unproblematic if one has a firm identity. However, when the definition from outside is not satisfying, one easily feels the wish to keep on seeking a definition for oneself.

Japanese children do not practice sentence patterns like "I am Japanese." I think a person learns to say "I am a Japanese" for the first time when he/she begins learning English. In English conversation classes it becomes necessary to introduce yourself and say from which country you come and what nationality you have. Therefore it is necessary to memorise the phrase "I am Japanese."

But otherwise? Inside Japan, if you look Japanese, have a Japanese name, or speak Japanese, nobody would ask you where you come from. Also other people besides Japanese live in Japan. There are many second and third generation Koreans. But if they have a Japanese name and have been born and brought up in Japan, Japanese will consider them to be Japanese. So (in Japan) you can often hear the expression, "(Japan is) a nation consisting of only one people." The reason for this, i.e. for understanding Japan as a racially homogenous nation, lies in the fact that you never need to explain to people around you that you are Japanese, and that you yourself practically never need

to reflect upon the fact that you are Japanese.

Now what should I answer when I am asked what "being Japanese" is? If I open the Kôjien (dictionary) I find the following entry –

1. "Japanese" refers to people with Japanese nationality, to "Being a member of the Japanese people."
2. Ethnically, "Japanese" refers to one of the Mongoloid races. The colour of the skin is yellow; the iris of the eye is blackish brown; the hair is black and straight. The language is Japanese.

Certainly the reference to "having Japanese nationality" is clear. However, what about people who have Japanese nationality but who were born and brought up abroad and have never lived in Japan? To the eye, these people are Japanese, and therefore they will probably be treated as Japanese when abroad.

Then, what about people from abroad who have taken on Japanese nationality? Legally they are Japanese, but will others see them as Japanese? If you look Japanese, have been born and brought up in Japan, speak and move like Japanese, then Japanese will see you as Japanese. Well, but if you clearly don't look Japanese, and neither your language nor your movements are native Japanese, will people then think you are Japanese even if you have Japanese nationality?

What about people who do not have Japanese nationality but who think themselves to be Japanese? In Japanese there are people without a *koseki* (family register). People with no *koseki* cannot prove to be Japanese nationals. May we call these people Japanese (nevertheless)? Legally speaking probably not, and yet people in Japan will not treat them as belonging to the category of "foreigner."

People who can be most easily defined as Japanese are those who have ethnically Japanese parents, have been born and brought up in Japan, and possess Japanese nationality. Those who do not fit this pattern may be seen in different ways, depending on interpretation. "That person is Japanese, but as he/she has been born and brought up abroad the person's 'inner level' is not Japanese," or, "That person is Japanese, but as he/she has lived abroad for a long time, mentally he/she is no longer like a Japanese" – expressions like these can sometimes be heard in Japan. To put it briefly, the definition of being Japanese differs, I believe, depending on temporal context and

personal point of view.

During the war, when Japan's defeat was sensed to be near, families who felt grief about sending their sons to war were certainly criticized for "not being a Japanese national" (*hikokumin*). However, in spite of such criticism, they certainly also received sympathy. People who offered their sympathy probably did not see these families as "not being Japanese nationals."

## **2. Being Asian**

What are "Asians?" According to the Kôjien Dictionary, Asia is an area defined "in the East by Japan, in the North by Siberia, in the South by Indonesia, and in the West by Turkey and the Arabic countries." Are people living in this area really "Asians?" To call all these people "Asians" seems to me far too large a conceptual frame. I searched the internet to get a clearer answer but was unsuccessful. In the photographs on the internet site of the "Asian Human Resource Fund" - co-sponsored by the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry and the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology - the persons depicted could not be identified as to whether they were Japanese or not. Evidently, (therefore), "Asian Human Resource" refers merely to countries near to Japan, i.e. countries from China and South Korea to Southeast Asia. This view tallies with my own feelings. What I imagine to be "Asians" are people from China and South Korea in the North to people from Southeast Asia in the South.

However, when Japanese speak of "Asians," I think they are not including themselves. Though Japan knows it lies in Asia, I feel that when speaking of "Asians" we are referring to people living in foreign countries that call themselves "Asian."

## **3. Am I a typical Japanese?**

Am I a typical Japanese woman? I don't know. I cannot define this for myself. I have never been told in Japan that I was a "typical Japanese woman." Would an ultra-nationalist be called a "typical Japanese?" Would somebody who is accomplished in tea ceremony and flower arrangement, likes to wear kimono, and obeys their husband, be called a "typical Japanese woman?" I have never thought of myself as a typical Japanese woman in these terms.

However, in Germany I have been told, "Your way of thinking is typically Japanese,"

"The way you argue is typically Japanese." People who said this knew I was Japanese, and they knew about Japan.

In Germany, I introduce myself as coming from Japan, and as being Japanese. Obviously people immediately wonder where I come from, as they can see that I am not of the European type and speak (a foreign kind of) German.

In Germany, or rather, outside Japan, I am a Japanese, or, for the country I am in, a foreigner. I am painfully aware of this. Being a foreigner means that all kinds of formalities are extremely troublesome. Sometimes, being a foreigner means being treated in an indifferent, unfriendly way. Being a foreigner implies feeling restrictions. Being a foreigner means (feeling others) to be creating a certain distance. Things like this I have never felt in Japan. Outside Japan I belong to a minority. As long as I was inside Japan I belonged to a large majority, so once I came abroad I felt something I had never felt before.

What would I feel like if I took on German nationality? Would I then cease to be a Japanese? Officially, a person without Japanese nationality cannot be called a Japanese. Would my Japanese father in Japan then say, "My daughter has become a foreigner; she is no longer a Japanese?" Certainly, on paper I would not be Japanese, but by what kind of definition would he refer to me?

If I took on German nationality, would the people around me see me as a German? On paper I would be German, but as a concrete human being people would probably not treat me as a German.

If I gave up Japanese citizenship and took on German citizenship, how would I personally see myself? Most likely, I would see myself as German on paper but inwardly as Japanese, like before. I am almost certain that, whatever might happen, I would continue thinking of myself as Japanese.

#### **4. Am I a typical Asian?**

Am I typically Asian? As I don't know anybody who might be called "typically Asian" I cannot answer this question. People of the same yellow race differ among each other, and culturally there are great gaps between them. As far as I am concerned I would have absolutely no confidence in calling myself typically Asian.

However, if I move into a European country I am seen by the people around me as typically Asian. It is rare that people immediately guess me to be Japanese; I have been thought of as Chinese, Korean, Thai, or Mongolian. Evidently I look like a person of the Asian type. I had never really been conscious of being Asian, but being in a foreign country I am now made to think about it. For instance, when I see that everyone besides me is of the European type, I think to myself, "There am I, quite alone from Asia." However, I never think, "There am I, quite alone a Japanese." What others can see about me is not my nationality. If others think anything about me it is just, "There's a person from Asia." As for everything else, they have no information; they would have to ask me directly. Evidently, however, this is usually not important, and people would not ask directly where you come from. So, just seeing me, people realise I am Asian, and that's it. I just like to believe that is surely how others see me. As a consequence I have come to think of myself as an Asian person.

Frankly speaking, I do not really like this. In Europe, belonging to a minority of persons of the Asian type sometimes stirs up my feelings, but as a rule this just makes me feel extremely on my guard. Not because I am Asian, but because I am conscious of belonging to a minority. I cannot really explain why this is so, but I very often feel uneasy. So if I look around and see someone else apparently from Asia, no matter from what country, this gives me a sense of relaxation. I wonder why that is so. This is true even if I do not exchange a single word with that person from Asia.

#### **4. What am I?**

It is practically impossible for me to define just for myself what I am. So I keep searching for a frame to deal with this question. When I am in Japan I was never conscious of being Japanese. But I did think about other aspects, for instance, that I was female, or about the name of my school, my home address, or the structure of my family. These things formed me.

When I for the first time made a trip abroad I noticed that I no longer looked like the majority. I noticed that I was of the yellow race. I had already learned that at school in Japan, but when I realised abroad that I belonged to a minority of persons of the yellow race, I felt terrible fatigue. When I was at school in Japan and we learnt that we belonged to the yellow race I had never felt such fatigue.

Whether I like it or not, living in Germany I feel I am not German but Japanese and Asian. I often don't really care much about the question whether I am Japanese or Asian, but what is important is that in Germany I am not German, I am a foreigner. And yet, just knowing that I am a foreigner in Germany does not mean that my nationality doesn't matter to me. In Germany, I am a foreigner, but at the same time I am Japanese. Japan is the place I belong to. This is something extremely important. It has nothing to do with patriotism. It is just my fondness for the country I was born and brought up in. I am fond of Japan as the place where my family and my friends are. And it is this Japan whose nationality I possess. Sometimes I am furious about what is happening in Japan, and often I am worried about Japan, but, the way I feel at present, I would not want to give up my Japanese nationality. Perhaps that is because Japan is still a country at peace. It could be that once in the future Japanese nationality is no longer important to me. And yet I will probably (still) think of myself as Japanese. Even if someday people should say, "She is no longer like a Japanese."