

Stranger in a Strange Land

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

Alexis Palmer

Thesis Advisor
Andrea Wolfe

Signed

Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana

April 2016

Expected Date of Graduation
May 7, 2016

Sp Coll
Undergrad
Thesis
LD
2489
.Z4
2016
.P35

Abstract

In the Fall semester of 2015, I studied abroad for three months at Sapporo University in Sapporo, Japan. I made many discoveries during my time in Japan and expanded my cultural knowledge, but since I was attending university, I mainly got the perspective of a Japanese college student. I began to observe the differences between myself and a typical Japanese student, and I also observed the similarities. I came to the conclusion that culture and age were two major factors that affected what we had in common and what we didn't, and I grouped my observations into five categories that I could compare and contrast: social outings, drinking culture, social hierarchy, sexuality and body-image, and education. I composed a memoir to present these observations, and I drew upon my personal experiences and the experiences of some of the other exchange students, as well as articles and other sources concerning Japanese culture. My objective is to explain the impact that age and culture have on our ability to connect with others, and to promote cultural understanding and appreciation.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Andrea Wolfe for advising me through this project. Her detailed advice helped me to improve not only the content but also the writing of this project.

I would like to thank Dr. Sadatoshi Tomizawa and the Study Abroad Office for giving me the opportunity to study abroad in Japan, which inspired the topic for this project.

I would like to thank my family, friends, and fiancé for supporting me during the creation of this project.

Stranger in a Strange Land

Introduction

In the Fall semester of 2015, I was lucky enough to be given the opportunity by Ball State University to study at Sapporo University in Sapporo, Japan, for three months. This was quite literally my dream come true. I was a Japanese major in my senior year, and I'd passionately longed to travel to Japan ever since I was little, but I had never imagined that I would get to actually experience living and studying there. I thought that I would simply see Japan through the lens of a tourist - eat some Japanese food, see some old temples and shrines, go shopping in Tokyo, and so forth. And, while that would have been nice, the experience I had was so much more personal and fulfilling. It was a journey, a search for knowledge, independence, and understanding through human connections. It was an adventure that I couldn't forget even if I wanted to, because the people I met and experiences I had with them are sunk deep in my marrow - they're a part of me now, and I've changed because of them.

In that much too brief time in Japan, I saw and did things that I had initially only dreamed about, and some that I had never even considered before. Now, months after I've already returned to the States, the memories and feelings are vivid in my mind. One that is especially vivid is of a time when I felt the most accepted, comfortable, and in awe of our world and its cultural diversity.

Flashback to September: I'm awkwardly shuffling my chopsticks between my fingers - I haven't quite gotten the hang of them yet - and looking despairingly at the mountain of meat that's sizzling on the grill. It's definitely not your good ol' American BBQ. There are mini sausages and strips of chicken, pork, and beef in place of burgers and hotdogs, but the smell is equally as tantalizing. I'm clutching a small cup of bitter Japanese sake in my fist instead of a beer. It's too strong for my tastes, but I sip it to be polite.

To my right, the Korean exchange students have started chatting in Korean - completely unintelligible to me, but fascinating nonetheless. Shingo, our generous friend and gracious host, mentions a good movie he saw recently. Movies - my interest is piqued. I eagerly jump in, and we praise film after film, discussing American movies in Japanese. Even though my Japanese language skills aren't perfect, it feels so simple and natural to move past the slightly strange taste of foreign words on my tongue and to just talk and share our passion for film.

I take a moment to look around me. I'm surrounded by such diversity, college students from all over the world. I'm talking and eating and drinking with fellow Americans, Koreans, New Zealanders, Chinese, and Japanese. It's in this moment that I realize with breathtaking clarity that I'm in love. I'm in love with humanity. I'm in love with culture. I'm in love with our similarities and differences. We all come from different countries, cultures, and walks of life, but we've come together because of one unifying factor - college. For the most part, we're all 18-23-year-olds who are trying to obtain degrees, find jobs, and make our places in this world. And surprisingly enough, this one commonality is sufficient enough to promote connections and bonding. Shingo takes his shoes off before he enters a house, as is the Japanese custom, while I stomp right in with my shoes still on because this custom isn't as strictly practiced in America. But we both know how to have a good snowball fight, because we're young and energetic and playful - we may be from different countries, but we're young twenty-somethings who just want to have a little fun.

I have an opportunity to make comparisons like these and to extract meaning from them because I'm in such a unique position. Out of the more than seven billion people on this earth, I'm one of the limited number who is able to say that they've been immersed in a culture that is not their own, and during the time in my life when I'm truly becoming my own person and transforming my former assumptions. Therefore, I think that it's my responsibility to share my discoveries with my generation, to try to foster cultural understanding and appreciation amongst my peers so that they can promote this to future generations. It's so incredibly easy to misunderstand and hate and be angry. So many of us see differences and treat them as things that should be disliked and feared, and, as a result, invisible barriers are formed between us and everyone else who is different. This makes it difficult to form connections with people from different countries and cultures, because our most basic human similarities are drowned out by the more obvious differences: their skin is a different color, the words that come out of their mouth are unintelligible, or the clothes they wear are strange.

As a result of my study abroad experience, I learned that culture and age are two major factors that affect what I have in common with the people I met and what I don't. Some of our habits, interests, and lifestyle choices seem to be the same or similar despite our different cultural backgrounds because we're college students who are similar in age, while others were very different even though we fall into the same age group, because the cultural gap is simply so large. The areas of social life that I was able to compare and contrast can be divided into five categories: social outings, drinking culture, social hierarchy, sexuality and body-image, and education. By cross-examining my experiences in these areas as a college student in America and my brief time as a college student in Japan, I've learned that age and culture have a part in shaping our social experiences, but that, despite the initial barriers posed by our varying cultural backgrounds, the Japanese students, other exchange students and I were able to break them down with patience and understanding.

Cultural differences can seem like stark, looming mountains that are too vast to travel around and too intimidating to scale without immense amounts of courage and experience, and the more extreme the differences are from what we comfortably know, the more daunting the task may seem. Those mountains appear large from a distance, but, as we get closer, they shrink into soft, rolling hills. The only tools we need to overcome them are a willingness to learn and understand, and to be able to temporarily stow away our presumptions and stereotypes of how things *should* be or how they *ought* to be. Some people say that we shouldn't see differences, or that we should see them and they shouldn't matter. But I disagree. Our differences are fascinating and beautiful, and they should be noticed, appreciated, and learned from.

If we can do this, then perhaps we'll find that our differences can bring us even closer together as human beings than our similarities can.

Chapter 1: It's Pronounced Kah-rah-oh-kay, Not Kary-oh-key

During one of the first few times I went out with some of the Japanese and foreign exchange students, I discovered two things: I love karaoke, but I'm really terrible at it. Taylor (a really cool guy from New Zealand) and Elizabeth (my fellow American buddy) aren't at that American Idol level either, and, since there's strength in numbers, we stuck together and belted out the songs of Billy Joel, Foreigner, and other 80s legends. The Korean, Chinese, and Japanese students smiled politely and clapped encouragingly, but I had the suspicion that they weren't very impressed and it probably took all of their self-restraint to not clasp their hands over their ears for protection. It was hard not to feel self-conscious amongst this group because they were all either *really good* or at least decent at singing. It's like they have karaoke in their genes or something. Must be an Asian thing.

I jokingly thought that at the time, but, in all seriousness, most of them were decent at karaoke because of how common it is in their cultures. Karaoke is an extremely popular social activity amongst all ages, but especially young people, in many Asian countries including Japan. You gather up a bunch of friends, rent a room for a couple of hours or more, and sing your heart out in the privacy of your mostly sound-proof room. You're also able to pay a certain amount of yen for access to the unlimited drink bar, which includes alcohol in many establishments (for those needing some liquid courage). It's a great way to relax, relieve some stress, and bond with your friends. And, if you do it enough, then, eventually, you can coax some pretty decent sounds out of your vocal chords, which seemed to be the case for almost all of the Japanese students I went with.

Now, let's contrast this with Americanized version of karaoke, which usually goes something like this: at a bar or restaurant, singing on a stage in front of dozens of strangers' eyes, and, overall, usually a pretty mortifying experience. So, karaoke is a type of social activity that exists in both Japanese and American culture, and it's something that is typically enjoyed by students my age. However, because it's something that isn't as common in America, and even where it does exist it's very different from the Japanese version, my experiences with it and attitudes toward it are not the same as my fellow Japanese students'. They are much more comfortable with doing this mildly embarrassing activity with friends and strangers alike as a result of their frequent exposure to it.

There's another popular Japanese social activity that involves baring one's insecurities to others, and that's going to onsen, which are Japanese hot springs. This communal bathing tradition used to be for the purpose of getting clean, since not all houses used to have baths, but now they're mainly used for relaxation at resorts and such. However, it's not like an American hot tub where you change into your swimsuit and hop in. You have to strip down and shower with the shampoo, soap, and such that are provided for you before you enter the actual hot spring (the Japanese are very clean people). Then, you roam around the hot spring and sauna completely naked with all of the other onsen-goers. The Japanese don't seem to be shy about it, and it's pretty common for them to do this with their family, friends, and coworkers of the same-sex. The *English Dictionary of Japanese Ways of Life* explains, "Some Japanese find a sort of emotional closeness in bathing together" (Honna, 172). It seems to build trust and increase comfort within social relationships. However, as a Westerner who isn't used to being so casually intimate with others, I felt pretty awkward and stiff at the beginning. I could never imagine casually lounging naked in a hot spring with my classmates at Ball State. For the Japanese students, though, it's a common social activity that promotes bonding.

I gained more opportunities to observe the similarities and differences between what typical Japanese students do for fun, and what many American students do for fun, as I made more friends and got invited to more social outings. I found that some of the differences are due to cultural factors because there are simply things in Japan that don't exist in America or just aren't that widespread, and vice versa, like karaoke and onsen. However, more interesting is the fact that some of the types of social outings are the same or similar, but the behaviors and attitudes of the people toward it vary because they are influenced by cultural values. I think that a good example for this is the time when I went to my first "college party" in Japan. I don't know what exactly my expectations were, if I even had any, but I was a little surprised and intrigued at what I experienced. There were no frat boys toting kegs of Bud Light, no beer pong competitions, and no drunk hanky-panky going on in the bedroom. Rather, it was a small gathering of friends who knew each other pretty well, consuming lots of snacks and alcohol while playing drinking games or just hanging out. And all of the parties I got invited to after this were similar.

So, as I expected, college parties exist in both America and Japan because they are a product of our age group. We're all college students who are finally out of our parents' houses, and we're at that age when we're discovering our independence, testing our boundaries, and taking more risks. These values and desires are generally common for our age group, and it's because of this that, even though the group of us are from different countries and cultures, we could all come together and connect over these mutual feelings. However, what I didn't expect is that the general behaviors and attitudes that Japanese students display at parties are somewhat different, and I think that can be attributed to the impact of our cultural values and customs.

Perhaps it can be specifically attributed to the difference between the indulgence level of the two countries. This is an aspect of a study done by Professor Geert-Hofstede in which he examined how values in the workplace are influenced by culture. He defines culture as "the collective programming of the mind distinguishing the members of one group or category of people from other" ("National"), and he identifies six dimensions of national culture, which are as follows: power distance, individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, long-term orientation, and indulgence. The indulgence aspect of culture deals with "the extent to which people try to control their desires and impulses" ("National"). Based on this study, Japan has a culture of restraint, and "restrained societies do not put much emphasis on leisure time and control the gratification of their desires. People with this orientation have the perception that their actions are restrained by social norms and feel that indulging themselves is somewhat wrong" ("National"). Therefore, maybe it can be said that the idea of Japan's restraint culture has a role in influencing the way that young Japanese people interact socially. The parties and get-togethers that I experienced in Japan were small and personal, and I didn't observe too many people going overboard on alcohol or doing anything too extreme and reckless. The United States, on the other hand, is identified as an indulgent culture, which implies that people in our culture, in general, have relatively weak control over their impulses. This could perhaps be used to explain the social interactions of American college students, which often involve a large number of people and a "play hard" mentality. The college party scene especially seems to exemplify this, with people often having weak control over their alcohol consumption, sexual impulses, and other such things.

The Japanese students, the other foreign exchange students and I had a lot of good times together during my brief stay, and what made these even more enjoyable were the individual and cultural quirks that we all brought to the table. Whether we sang rock and roll or K-pop during

karaoke, and whether we were playing American or Japanese drinking games, and so on, we were all able to learn and grow from these cultural differences.

Unfortunately, though, I still suck at karaoke.

Chapter 2: A Drinker's Paradise

There are many things to which college students must devote their time, energy and money: apartment rent, textbooks, tuition, groceries, transportation, and, of course, the most important of them all, alcohol. As an eternally stressed college senior, I've come to discover the spiritually healing effects of adult beverages. The stereotype exhibited in many American films - of college students temporarily escaping from their academic responsibilities by drinking themselves into intoxicated oblivion at crazy and reckless house parties - exists for a reason, and that's because it's kind of true. However, I've always wondered what the college drinking culture is like in other countries. I assume that, where there are stressed college students, there is also a drinking culture, but is it the same, similar, or completely different? From my experience in Japan, the Japanese students I met liked to drink and drank often just like American college students, and these similar attitudes towards alcohol can be attributed to our age group. However, alcohol consumption is viewed very differently by our two cultures because of our histories and cultural practices, and so I was pretty surprised by the more relaxed and lenient drinking environment in Japan.

As an American, one of the things that shocked me the most about drinking in Japan is that underage drinking doesn't seem to be treated as harshly as it is in America. The legal drinking age in Japan is twenty, but there were numerous instances when I went to restaurants or convenience stores with my underage friends, and they easily bought alcohol with no questions asked. I remember the first time I bought a 6-pack of Sapporo beer from a *conbini* (which is what the convenience stores are called in Japan). The cashier didn't ask to see my ID, but, instead, there was a screen facing me which, upon purchase, requested me to push a button confirming that I was indeed twenty years old. The best part is that I didn't even get the chance to push it because the cashier, who I believe was under the assumption that I was a lost and confused foreigner who couldn't read Japanese, pushed it for me. The delicacy and strictness of alcohol laws ingrained within me by a lifetime of American culture invoked feelings of horror and caution in response to this apparently harmless action. I was twenty-one and, therefore legal, but I could still hardly believe that no one wanted to verify that.

Cultural values absolutely play a huge role in a society's attitude towards alcohol, and cultural values are often formed by history. Compared to many other countries in the world, the United States is often considered strict in its treatment of alcohol. A prime historical example is the issue of Prohibition, a thirteen-year nationwide constitutional ban on the sale, production, importation, and transportation of alcohol. This ban was put in place in response to alcoholism, drug abuse, and other such problems in society that people hoped to cure in some way; however, it was eventually repealed. A more modern example that reflects America's strict views on alcohol, and, one that hits closer to home, is Indiana's Lifeline Law. IN.gov explains that this law "provides immunity for the crimes of public intoxication, minor in possession, minor in consumption, and similar laws, to persons who identify themselves to law enforcement while seeking medical assistance for a person suffering from an alcohol-related health emergency" ("Indiana"). This law was established to encourage underage people to contact the authorities in emergencies, without fear of suffering legal consequences. The fact that there was even a need for this law in the first place reveals the strictness of the American mindset in regards to alcohol, and reveals the sense of secrecy and fear that has developed within the sub-culture of college students because of it.

Now, let's make a 180° and look at Japan, where one can purchase beer from vending machines, I repeat, *vending machines*. I knew about this before I traveled there, so I made it a

priority on my Japan to-do list to buy a beer from a vending machine. I was successful, and, at least with the machine I used, there was no sort of reliable age verification whatsoever. Also, it is perfectly legal to drink alcohol in public in Japan. Elizabeth and I once bought a couple of Sapporo beers and walked through Odori Park drinking them just because we could. But, even though I knew it was legal, I couldn't shake the nervous paranoia and couldn't stop looking over my shoulder, because I knew that in America this would be so illegal.

Japan's more lenient attitude towards alcohol consumption is also tied into business practices, in which alcohol consumption plays an important role in the formation and maintenance of harmonious relationships between coworkers and employers. There's an interesting term that goes along with this: *nomination*, which is a combination of the words "nomi," which is the Japanese word for "drink," and "communication." The practice of nomination is when coworkers gather together after work and bond over drinks, which is expected to strengthen workplace relationships. At a Professional Communication Conference, the role of nomination in Japanese business practices was evaluated, and the author explained that it was influenced by the drinking culture in Japan. He states that, "today, drinking continues to play a central role in Japanese culture, in the home, in pubs after work, and at every kind of religious ceremony or secular celebration, ranging from weddings, anniversaries, and reunions to festivals and funerals, where excessive drinking accompanied by singing and dancing is a socially acceptable form of normal public behavior, designed to promote social bonding and to facilitate communal celebration" (Yamuachi, 3).

Just like in American culture, Japan's history plays a role in the accepting view of alcohol consumption found in Japanese culture today. The authors talk about physical remnants of sake that have been found in Japanese ruins, and literary accounts of people in ancient Japan who often celebrated with drinking. He says that "Japan is a drinker's paradise and seems to have been for a very long time" (Yamuachi, 3). "Drinker's paradise" is a very accurate description, considering that in Japan there's an amazing thing called a "nomihodai," which is essentially an all-you-can-drink alcohol buffet. You pay a certain amount, maybe like 1500 yen (roughly 13 USD), for a certain amount of time, usually around an hour and 20 minutes, and then you can order as many drinks as you can handle during that time period. It's all a college student could ever ask for and more. I attended many a nomihodai during my time there, and I can safely say that, if such a thing existed in the U.S., American college students would drink them dry.

I should probably also mention the stark difference between the attitudes of college campuses regarding alcohol. Many American colleges have a "dry campus" policy which means you can't have alcohol on the property. Meanwhile, at Sapporo University, I was spontaneously invited to a dinner-party one day that took place in a professor's office in one of the buildings on campus. My heart almost stopped when I saw that the professor and his students were casually drinking Russian vodka with their food. When they offered me some, I thought it had to be a trap or a trick or something, because I couldn't believe that this was actually *allowed* on campus. But it was apparently totally acceptable.

So, in general, Japan is a lot more relaxed about all things regarding alcohol than the U.S. is, and that directly affects the college environments of these two countries. Because alcohol is not portrayed as something so taboo and forbidden, the drinking environment at Sapporo University was relatively laid-back and there was no sense of secrecy or sneakiness amongst my Japanese friends. This was a huge change for me compared to the drinking culture at Ball State and other American universities, where drinking feels a lot riskier. I can't say whether one

culture's view is necessarily better than the other, but I will say that I really miss those beer vending machines.

Chapter 3: Notice Me, Senpai

My need for a caffeinated beverage drove my perusal of the cold drink section of the university's convenience store. I snatched a can of Boss coffee off of the shelf. I wish they had canned coffee in America. This stuff is practically designed for busy, sleep-deprived college students. Elizabeth, one of the Americans from Nebraska, was making her selection when we were approached by a Japanese student whom I didn't recognize. He greeted us and then asked me the question that I would come to dread during my time here:

"What year are you?"

I answered without hesitation that I'm a fourth-year student, and his demeanor changed instantly. He looked surprised, and he quickly bowed, apologizing to me by using polite language that the Japanese often use with those who are of higher social status than them. I frantically tried to think of how to rectify the situation. I started to babble and told him that there was no need for that.

I definitely wasn't prepared for this kind of situation. I knew before I came to Japan that there is a hierarchy in Japanese society, but I didn't expect to really encounter it since I'm a foreigner, and many Japanese don't seem to expect foreigners to be fully aware of Japanese customs. The kind of interaction that I did encounter in Japan, though, is called a senpai-kouhai relationship, senpai meaning "upperclassman" and kouhai meaning "underclassman." In the journal *Sociological Insight*, there was a study done on the senpai-kouhai relationship in junior high schools in Japan. During junior high, Japanese students begin to adapt to the kind of hierarchical and dependent relationships that exist in Japanese society. Kouhai are expected to use polite language when addressing their senpai, while the senpai are allowed to speak casually to their kouhai. The author emphasizes "the focus on interpersonal harmony in Japanese" and explains how "the harmony is kept by clarifying hierarchical relationships in a conversation" (qtd. in Sano, 60). This value of social harmony is also found in business settings and other areas of Japanese society. The author points out the difficulties that come with hierarchical relationships, stating that "Kouhai occasionally struggle to speak to Senpai because of the strict expectations for polite language" (qtd. in Sano, 60). Kouhai also have to be careful about stating their opinions to their senpai, because if they express their dissatisfaction, then they could cause disharmony in the group. Therefore, forming social relationships at Japanese schools can be difficult, because there is a sense of caution and delicacy when communicating with one's fellow classmates.

I observed this sense of caution in relationships between students at Sapporo University. It seemed to me that relationships were somewhat more stiff and formal than relationships between students at Ball State. At Ball State, I can walk up to any random student and have a casual conversation with them, regardless of if they're also a senior or if they're a freshman. However, at Sapporo University, if I were a normal Japanese student then I would have to find out the year of the student I was approaching so that I would know how to safely address them. One of my Japanese friends, a 23-year-old named Hayate, became pretty annoyed one time when one of my other Japanese friends, Tomi, who is 21-years-old and therefore Hayate's kouhai, continuously used casual language when speaking to Hayate.

This hierarchy was something that was really difficult for me to adjust to and understand, because in America there really isn't a strict hierarchy. Yes, people are expected to show respect to their professors, managers, elders, etc., but there isn't a special form of language that people are expected to use, and these kinds of relationships can often be more casual and informal.

Meanwhile, in Japan, this hierarchy is very important, and it can be a serious faux pas if you mess it up.

This hierarchical system impacts the way social relationships are formed and how they are maintained, and the lack thereof in the United States does the same thing. Professor Geert-Hofstede's study can also be applied in this situation to cross-examine Japanese and American societies. The power distance dimension in particular can be used to explain this concept of social hierarchy. The study defines power distance as "the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally" ("National"), and it expresses the attitude of the culture towards the inequalities that exist among us. Japan has an intermediate score and is therefore a borderline hierarchical society. While it's not as hierarchical as other Asian countries, it's more so than America which has a low score. The reason for America's low score can possibly be attributed to the premise of "liberty and justice for all," the emphasis on equal rights in society and government, and the way that hierarchy within American organizations is typically established for convenience but is not always strictly enforced. As a result, individuals in society are typically regarded as equal, and this is especially true in a college environment because students are all within a similar age group. If I didn't know about Japan's social hierarchy, then I would think that relationships amongst Japanese college students would also be casual because of the similar age group. However, this is not the case because the cultural influence is so strong, and the hierarchy is deeply ingrained within the culture.

After my brief experience of being treated more politely because of my upperclassmen status, I avoided telling other students my year unless it was absolutely necessary. I won't lie and say that the inflated sense of superiority wasn't a little refreshing, but it was mostly just a little uncomfortable. I didn't want my status to be elevated - as a foreigner, it was hard enough just trying to fit in.

Chapter 4: Tattoos are Taboo

I'm pretty sure that this is the most vulnerable and exposed that I've felt in my entire life, I think as I awkwardly shuffle - completely naked - towards the onsen with a few of my female classmates. This communal bathing experience is a new one for me, and it's taking me a little bit to reach the same level of comfort that everyone else around me seems to feel. This full-exposure experience is nothing new for most Japanese people, but I'm definitely feeling self-conscious.

We're sinking into the heavenly heat of the clean water, our skin basking in the rejuvenating effects of the steam, and I take this time to reflect on the irony of the situation. I feel kind of weird and uncomfortable about being naked in front of a bunch of also naked, female strangers, yet it's completely acceptable to me to wear shirts that show my cleavage in front of male strangers. I suppose that this could be due to the sexualization that pervades American culture. Japan, however, is a more modest culture and excessively tight or revealing clothes are frowned upon, yet it's commonplace to be naked in a hot spring with lots of other people of your gender.

I knew before I came to Japan that, when it comes to revealing clothing, Japanese women in general tend to dress more modestly than American women. However, I was surprised at the self-consciousness I felt when I wore slightly revealing clothes that I wouldn't have thought twice about in America, and the pressure I felt to dress more modestly while I was there. Since I was there during the fall and winter and only caught the end of the warm weather, I didn't have to struggle as much with the question of "Is this appropriate to wear, or should I probably not?" Some of the other exchange students who were there for the entire year did experience this dilemma, though. One of the students from Nebraska, Jessica, said: "I personally didn't have any problem with people treating me differently based on clothing, but I did feel a need to cover my shoulders even if it was really hot because all other women did, although they all showed a lot of leg. I never saw tank tops, or even chest beyond the collar bone." I, too, noticed this when I observed my classmates and girls walking on campus. Many of them wore really short shorts or skirts, even when there was a mountain of snow outside, but, at the same time, they wore loose sweaters or shirts that clung to their throats.

This seemed like a bit of a contradiction to me, and I never really understood why this was. Elizabeth, however, was able to enlighten me because of something she was told. She said, "No one ever expressly said I couldn't show my chest. And as a foreigner, I'm sure I could have got away with it fine, but I felt SO uncomfortable with it exposed after being asked about it and then having an older Japanese lady explain that it was a very 'sexual' part of a woman's body for Japanese, I always felt the need to cover up. The older lady said that for Japanese, the chest, shoulders and upper back were all considered very beautiful, but extremely erotic so it was really only appropriate to show them to your lovers because otherwise it cheapened your look to have it constantly exposed. You couldn't be treated with the same respect as a woman who was all covered." I take this explanation with a grain of salt since it came from an older Japanese lady, because it could possibly be a more old-fashioned view. Either way, it provides a possible insight into the different views of sexuality between Japanese and American culture.

Despite all of this, I guess I still expected Japanese girls to wear more form-fitting and revealing clothing because of the associations with sexuality and self-confidence. These qualities seem to develop more during the ages of 18 to the early 20s, at least from my observations, and because of this development the clothing style often seems to follow. Therefore, I thought that this image was not simply an American one but might exist for girls of college age across

various cultures. While there are girls in Japan who wear these types of clothes sometimes, it doesn't seem to be very common, and I think that this can be attributed to the impact of the societal and cultural expectations.

Speaking of bodies, forms of body modification like tattoos, piercings, and hair-dye are also much less common amongst the students at Sapporo University than at Ball State, and that's because they're not as acceptable in Japanese society. And that's an understatement, because a tattoo can get you into some unfortunate situations. An article from the *Japan Daily Press* helps to explain this negativity towards tattoos in Japanese culture: "Despite the popularity of Japanese art and imagery among tattoo artists and enthusiasts in the West, even the most beautiful piece of body work done by the most talented artist will result in disapproving looks and negative comments. Not only that, but even the smallest, most insignificant tattoo will get you thrown out or prohibited from entering certain public places.... There are prominent, clearly labeled signs at establishments like fitness gyms, public swimming pools, and especially at Japan's renown hot springs, that state anyone with *irezumi*, the Japanese word for 'tattoo,' are banned from entry" (Westlake). Yikes. This happened to Elizabeth once, when she was refused entrance to an onsen because of her tattoos.

This negative cultural attitude towards tattoos has to do with their association with the yakuza, the Japanese mafia, who have intricate full-body tattoos. The author of the article, who is an American, had a difficult time sympathizing with the severity of this aversion, as do I, but he also was able to look at the situation from the view of the Japanese and understand their fear. He says, "Imagine growing up in a culture where not just the media, but the culture as a whole is taught that tattoos have a direct association with a criminal lifestyle... There is a deep, culturally engrained reason why tattoos are not taken lightly in Japan" (Westlake). While I could definitely understand where he was coming from, it was still a little hard to fully comprehend this viewpoint because of my American culture, in which tattoos are generally accepted.

I don't think that I actually met any Japanese students who had tattoos. I was also hard-pressed to find any who had piercings other than earlobe piercings, and who dyed their hair any colors that weren't a lighter shade of brown. I can only recall a couple instances when I saw some guy or girl on campus with hair dyed bleach-blonde or auburn. One of my Japanese classmates dyed the bottom layer of her hair blonde because it was visible, but at the same time it was subdued. She really wanted to get a "crazy hair color," as she said, but since that could've given her problems at her part-time job and in society in general, she unfortunately felt as though she couldn't get it.

This lack of body modification was definitely a little strange for my eyes to behold since body modification is really popular for college students in America. I've seen students on campus with hair that's all colors of the rainbow: bright red, neon pink, sky-blue, and sometimes even the entire rainbow. And I've seen piercings on faces in creative places, and tattoos that are very visible. And this is all typically normal and acceptable in American society. However, there are sometimes some repercussions for having these in visible places. There are workplaces that will not hire you if you have piercings other than your ears that you can't take out, or if you have tattoos that you can't hide. They don't have the negative association with the criminal underworld that they have in Japan, but they are often regarded as unprofessional.

I think that the individualism of American culture and the collectivism of Japanese culture might have an impact on the difference of bodily self-expression between America and Japan. There was a study done that examined the impact of individualism-collectivism at the cultural and individual level on the expression of emotions between these two countries. The

authors explain the differences between Western and Eastern cultures, and how America and Japan fall into the categories of individualistic and collectivist. They state, "In many Western cultures, the dominant norms and values reinforce both the idea of the self as independent and autonomous and the assessment of the self in terms of individual achievements and characteristics. This cultural framework is thought to produce an independent, individualistic self" (qtd. in Saito, 728). This means that in Western countries such as the U.S., people generally identify themselves in terms of individual characteristics, because of cultural values such as independence. This could explain why body-modification - and perhaps also skin exposure - is much more accepted in American culture. Dyed hair, tattoos, and so forth are characteristics that individualize a person and make them stand out from the crowd.

On the other side of the coin are Eastern cultures, and the author states, "By contrast, in many eastern and some Western cultures, the dominant cultural milieu supports conceptions of the self as intertwined and interdependent with others. In these cultures, the self is evaluated in terms of one's fit in the social setting and one's fulfillment of social and cultural obligations. Such a cultural framework is said to produce an interdependent, collectivistic self" (qtd. in Saito, 728). This means that in Eastern countries such as Japan, people generally identify themselves by collective characteristics, and they try to meet societal expectations that are formed by cultural values. This seems to explain why excessive skin exposure and body modification are not as socially acceptable in Japanese culture. If the desire is to fit in to the social setting, and these things make one stand out and appear independent from the surrounding society, then it makes sense that they would be frowned upon in Japanese society.

However, the Japanese students I met seemed to have more relaxed attitudes about piercings, tattoos, hair-dye and such, and I think that can be attributed to the progressive thinking and independence of our age group. Although most of them didn't have these forms of body modification, perhaps because they were trying to fulfill their cultural obligations, none of them expressed disapproval about it and some of them said they wanted to do those things. Just like the Japanese girls at the university expressed sexuality through exposing their legs because that's what is acceptable within the culture. At first I couldn't see through my own bias created by my liberal culture, and I thought that maybe Japanese students were just indifferent towards these bodily forms of self-expression. But as I became more and more immersed in the culture, I learned that they have their own ways of doing so, and, although culture may subtly regulate how we present ourselves, we all have that desire to define who we are.

Chapter 5: The Spring Break of Life

To be honest, I was a little scared to start classes at Sapporo University. I knew that Japanese high schools tend to have extremely difficult coursework, strict rules, and high standards, so I came to Sapporo fully expecting the university to be the same. I tortured myself with negative and paranoid thoughts. What if the coursework is too difficult, or what if the professors are too strict? What if I fail and can't get credit for my study abroad? I didn't know what exactly to expect, and I feared the worst.

It turns out that my fears were for naught. After the first week of classes came and went, I was completely underwhelmed.

I was actually trying to figure out just how these Japanese students were *passing* anything. In essentially every class, every day, students arrived late. And not just a minute after the class started. I'm talking about students who walked in 5 minutes, 10 minutes, sometimes 15 minutes after class began. And, then, let's not forget the students who just decided to go back to sleep in the middle of class. Or those who seemed to only show up when it was convenient for them. I became increasingly suspicious of there existing any sort of enforceable attendance policy whatsoever. At Ball State, unless I was viciously throwing up or dying, I would rather drag myself to class than risk one out of three precious days of non-penalized absences.

So, it didn't seem to me like the Japanese students took class seriously at all, and I couldn't possibly fathom *why*. An article on Tofugu.com talks about this curious occurrence, and uses a phrase that translates to "College is the spring break of life" ("Japanese"). In summary, Japanese students are absolutely, depressingly miserable during high school, as they essentially start studying for college entrance exams in their second year and don't stop studying until they get in. Then, once they get into a big-name college, their work is basically done because that was their end goal. As the author states, "Japanese companies – based on anecdotal evidence – do not really look at an applicants' grades when they apply for jobs. What they do instead is look at the university name and after document screening subject job applicants to a barrage of interviews, internal tests, discussions and the like right in the middle of the school term – which in itself indicates how much companies value the education that the universities provide for their students" ("Japanese"). So, once a student gets into a good college, they typically only really need to pass their classes, but not to excel at them. After their excruciating high school years, they finally get the chance to have a social life and either spend all their time partying and slacking off or dedicating themselves to sports clubs.

The *English Dictionary of Japanese Ways of Life* supports the points discussed in the Tofugu.com article and helps to explain the cultural reasoning behind the Japanese education system. The author emphasizes the intensity of school from kindergarten up until college, and states, "Ironically, Japanese college life seems more like a four-year vacation between the days of cramming in secondary school and those of serious competition in their work after college graduation" (Honna, 104). This is because it's the *quality* of the school that's important - it's used as a means of social promotion. The author explains that "the prestige of the university a person attends often determines the status the person will ultimately achieve in life" (Honna, 104). Social hierarchy is important in Japanese culture, and this has influenced the education system to focus on preparing the students to get into the universities that will give them the most social status later in life.

This is not necessarily the same in the American education system, and that's because the cultural values in regards to education differ. While there is value attached to "big-name"

universities, such as Harvard, Princeton, etc., students' grades and accomplishments during college have a huge impact on whether or not employers will hire them or even give their applications a glance. If students slack off in college, then that's most likely going to negatively affect their future prospects, regardless of whether they went to Harvard or Ivy Tech. Hard work and individuality are valued in American culture, and those things are reflected in a student's academics and activities during college.

Individualism and collectivism can yet again help to explain these differences in the hiring processes of Japanese and American companies, which directly affect a student's performance in college. American employers hire with an individualistic viewpoint, whereas Japanese employers are the opposite because Japan is a collectivist culture. Some Yale researchers looked deeper into this issue and found that Japanese employers place more value on teamwork and interpersonal skills in their employees, because job assignments are typically given to groups rather than individuals. Therefore, they care a lot about the extracurricular activities that their employees participated in during college because extracurriculars develop those skills. Meanwhile, while these skills are also valued by American employees, there is also a focus on a person's unique qualities and skills. What can someone bring to the office that no one else has? The researchers state, "Japanese companies typically provide new recruits with extensive and intense in-house training, followed by a succession of job assignments for further on-the-job training. While U.S. firms recruit for specific jobs, Japanese firms discover through successive on-the-job training assignments those jobs that are best suited to the abilities of individual employees" (Abe, 77). So, why are Japanese college students going to work hard when they know that their grades don't matter too much, and they're going to be trained for the job anyways?

I honestly feel like I worked harder than most of my Japanese classmates, although that could have something to do with the fact that the classes weren't taught entirely in English...Regardless, I was surprised because I had thought that college would be pretty much the same everywhere. I expected the details to be different, such as the campus layout, the type of food served at dining halls, and so forth, but I thought that the sleep-deprived, stressed, hard-working college student was universal. But because the purpose and goals of education are different in Japan than in America, my academic experience during college, during my entire academic life actually, was completely different from the experiences of my fellow Japanese students. Therefore, even though we were college students within the same age group, our priorities were different because of the impact of culture on our education. Typically, an expanded social network comes hand-in-hand with college because students are constantly surrounded by other students, especially if they live on campus. They see each other at their dorms, at the dining halls, in class, at the gym, and so on, so it's relatively easy to connect and form bonds. So, because our education and socializing are occurring in the same setting, our academics are somewhat tied in to our social experiences. This creates a struggle between one's social life and one's academic life, and for me and many other American college students I know, the struggle to balance these two is often difficult and education *usually* wins out.

However, in my observation of the Japanese students, it often seemed like socializing won. As time passed and I made more friends and got invited to increasingly more outings, I found myself being drawn into this tempting lifestyle. My grades didn't fall, and I still studied and completed all of my homework, but I also became more willing to push things until the last minute in favor of hanging out with people. I would go to a party and drink on a Tuesday night, and would accept invitations for spontaneous adventures. Once, during the first few weeks I was

there, after working out with my friend Hayate, he invited me to go to the top of Mt. Moiwa (a popular tourist destination) with him and his friend. So, on a school night, I spontaneously journeyed to the top of a mountain to see the night lights of the city twinkling below me, like I was floating above the night sky.

Part of the reason that I was willing to be a little less studious than I am in America is because my time in Japan was so precious and limited. I only had three months to experience this once-in-a-lifetime adventure, and, even though I was there to study and learn, I didn't want to spend all of my days in my room with my face buried in textbooks. I wanted to spend as much time as possible with my new friends, sharing experiences together and putting my Japanese to practical use. However, I think that another reason that I was a little less focused on my studies was that I was beginning to adapt to the culture. It was a sort of "when in Rome" mentality. If that was how Japanese culture was and that's how Japanese students my age did things, then I wanted to try to be like that, too. And, after returning to America and my rigorous schedule of classes, meetings, and sports club practices at Ball State, my time at Sapporo University definitely felt like a "spring break of life."

Conclusion

Humans have always been afraid of the unknown. It's an evolutionary fear - for our ancestors, what they didn't know could harm them or kill them. We've come so far and we've built our collective knowledge like a child builds Lego houses; clumsily at first, with no blueprints or prior experience to reference, breaking it down when we realized it wasn't working. Then more steadily, building upon past mistakes and learning from the successes of others, until now we can smoothly add, take away, and replace pieces as needed. Yet, despite our relatively sturdy house of knowledge, we still retain that same fear. We may not fear the dark anymore since the discovery of fire, but now there are other objects of our fear, and one of those is being in a different culture.

The mere idea of attempting to exist within a culture that is not your own is truly a terrifying one, and the more different that culture is from the one you know, the more anxiety-inducing it is. I was absolutely thrilled to go to Japan and accomplish my lifelong dream, but that thrill was coupled with a generous helping of dread. Even though I can speak Japanese and I've learned about Japanese culture, the Japanese classroom can't possibly be compared to experiencing the real thing. I stepped off the plane in Japan and had to immediately accept a new fact: that I was an outsider in a place where nothing was familiar or within my comfort zone. Or, at least, that's how it initially appeared. My ears weren't able to distinguish anything from the steady stream of the Japanese speech around me. My eyes had to adjust to seeing only Japanese faces most of the time. My diet had to change, and rice and noodles became a staple. Yen instead of dollars, cars driving on the left instead of the right, a view of the mountains from my window instead of flat land - everything was new and unfamiliar. And, while it was exciting, it was also uncomfortable and intimidating. How could I possibly connect with anyone or anything when the gap between our cultures was so wide and gaping?

As the days went by, I discovered small comforts. A restaurant that served American-style food near my apartment, a Starbucks, some American candy and snacks. Then I settled in more as I found comfort in the familiarity of the American and other English-speaking foreign exchange students. However, I still felt like an alien in this strange land. I hadn't yet made friends with any Japanese students and was simply constructing a safety net of familiar objects and feelings around myself. I didn't know how to connect with my Japanese peers, and I was afraid that my Japanese language abilities wouldn't be proficient to bridge the gap. Little did I know that language wasn't even necessary. A connection existed between us before I even landed on Japanese soil - our age.

Age is not simply a number; compacted within that number are all of our life experiences up until that point, our fears, emotions, and desires, some of which can be age-specific. Our behaviors, our values, and our opinions are often very similar to others within our age group, and I discovered that this was the same with many of the Japanese college students I befriended. I struggled to adapt to chopsticks, couldn't always understand what people were saying to me, and stuck out like a sore thumb wherever I went, but, in the grand scheme of things, these were superficial concerns. I was able to have a playful snowball fight with Japanese, American, Korean, and New Zealand students alike, laughing and shouting and pushing each other over, and in that moment I didn't care who was from where because it didn't matter. We were just a bunch of college kids having a fun time, and that's the beautiful simplicity of it. We connected through our youth, through our sense of adventure and playfulness.

Cultural differences are not insurmountable barriers. They can be challenging and intimidating, but that's not necessarily a bad thing. Change promotes growth, and differences encourage learning. I discovered new things about myself, about Japan, about the importance of culture, and it was a beautiful and life-changing experience. I've come to appreciate and respect the differences that make us unique. However, I also realized that if you're so focused on the differences, then you won't notice the similarities. I was so hung up on how I was separated from the Japanese students by things such as the types of eating utensils we use and how important it is to remove your shoes inside buildings that I didn't initially see how many things we have in common simply because we're in college. We connected because of our age and strengthened those bonds by accepting, understanding, and being fascinated by our differences.

It seems to me, now, that culture is only a barrier because we perceive it that way. After my study abroad experience in Japan, I would say that culture is more like a set of stairs: the more that you encounter and the higher you climb, the more the world opens up before you.

Works Cited

- Abe, Shigeyuki, et al. "Why Do Students Take It Easy at the University?." *Japan: Why It Works; Why It Doesn't* (1998): 73-82.
- Honna, Nobuyuki, and Bates L. Hoffer. *English Dictionary of Japanese Ways of Life*. Tokyo: Ask, 2010.
- "Indiana Lifeline Law." *IN.gov*. N.p., n.d. Web. 04 Apr. 2016.
- "Japanese College: The Spring Break of Life." *Tofugu*. N.p., 16 Dec. 2013. Web. 04 Apr. 2016.
- "National Culture." *Geert-hofstede.com*. The Hofstede Centre, n.d. Web. 29 Jan. 2016.
- Saito, Isamu, Shara Morrison Barnett, and Cooki White Stephan. "Emotional Expression in Japan and the United States: The Nonmonolithic Nature of Individualism and Collectivism." *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* (1998): 728. *Galegroup.com*. Nov. 1998. Web. 24 Apr. 2016.
- Sano, Koji. "The Study of the Senpai-Kouhai Culture in Junior High Schools in Japan ." *Sociological Insight* 6 (2014): 59-68. *Utexas.edu*. Web. 22 Apr. 2016.
- Westlake, Adam. "The View of Tattoos in Japanese Society." *The Japan Daily Press*. The Japan Daily Press, 29 June 2012. Web. 04 Apr. 2016.
- Yamauchi, Kazuaki, and Thomas Orr. "Japan's Drinking Culture." *Nomination for Strategic Leadership: Best Practices in Japanese-style Communication for Managerial Purposes*. Proc. of Professional Communication Conference (IPCC), 2011 IEEE International, Cincinnati, Oh, USA. 1-7. *IEEE Xplore*. Web. 22 Apr. 2016.