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## Columnists

. . . and now for somewhere completely different

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In Japan, the trees are blue. So are the traffic lights, even though they look decidedly green to uninitiated outsiders. The Japanese do have a word for green, but when it comes to foliage and traffic signals, blue is the preferred term.

Blue trees are not the only initially puzzling thing about Japan. In a hundred tiny gestures and assumptions, Japan can seem just slightly out of kilter. When Japanese people refer to themselves, they point to their nose, not their heart. Many restaurants have no chairs. The Japanese count in units of ten thousand, making the population of Japan one-thousand-two-hundred-and-fifty ten thousands, not 125 million as you might have thought. The calendar is different, too. Circular not linear, time tracks each imperial reign - I am sending this dispatch, not from the year 2008, but from Heisei 20.

These are superficial differences to be sure, tiny variations of the sort found in many places a western-centric observer might consider "odd". But even experienced Japanologists can find Japan a topsy-turvy place. Lafcadio Hearn, an Irish-Greek who pitched up in Japan in 1890, only a decade after the country opened to the west, wrote: "The outward strangeness of things in Japan produces a queer thrill impossible to describe - a feeling of weirdness which comes to us only with the perception of the totally unfamiliar."

Hearn was no ingenuer or racist. A naturalised Japanese citizen, he was known as Yakumo Koizumi (or, rather, Koizumi Yakumo, since

the family name is stated first in Japanese). He married the daughter of a samurai, spoke Japanese and spent the last 15 years of his life in Japan. Yet foreshadowing a sentiment often expressed by today's long-time residents, puzzled at their inability to grasp what they imagine to be the essence of Japan, he says: "Long ago the best and dearest Japanese friend I ever had said to me, a little before his death, 'when you find, in four or five years more, that you cannot understand the Japanese at all, then you will begin to know something about them.'" Tellingly, his book was entitled *Japan: An Attempt at Interpretation*. A year after his attempt, he was dead.

I got to thinking about the question of Japan's uniqueness after reading *Japan Through the Looking Glass*. Its author, Cambridge anthropologist Alan Macfarlane, contends that Japan is not just "trivially different from the west and other civilisations, but different at such a deep level that the very tools of understanding we normally use prove inadequate". When I called him at his home in England, he professed to be just as confused after 15 years of thinking about Japan as Hearn was. "In Japan, I start off with a feeling of similarity and then, growingly, things become more strange," he said. "Japan is unique in that it combines two different sides: the surface of a modern, rational economy with politics and law and so on, but behind that a set of social norms and religious beliefs that are totally at variance with that. Almost every aspect of life, from sumo wrestling and tea ceremony, even business, has a feeling of something other than itself, beyond itself."

I had been confronted with the idea that Japan was different - differently different - even before I set foot there as the FT's correspondent five years ago. Back then I had read, as everybody does, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, the classic western anthropological study of the country by Ruth Benedict. The first

sentence of the book is an affirmation of strangeness: “The Japanese were the most alien enemy the United States had ever fought.”

Based on interviews with Japanese immigrants, Benedict describes a society operating on entirely different lines. She famously characterises it as a culture of shame rather than of (Christian-style) guilt, one with a samurai-derived honour code of mysterious (and not straightforwardly translatable) principles of *giri*, *on*, *haji* and *gimu*. We learn of the honour of the vendetta and seppuku (belly-slitting suicide), and the shame of surrender. Reading the book, by no means discredited today, it is easy to jump to the conclusion that Japan is another world.

To lay my cards on the table, I have always been suspicious of this view. I start from the principle that people are people and that any attempt to render them otherwise probably has an ulterior motive, such as laying the groundwork to fight them. To start with the conclusion first, my basic view still holds that Japan is no more different than Guatemala or Madagascar or Britain. But my conviction has been sorely tested.

When I arrived in Tokyo in 2002, there were a few things to get used to besides blue trees. Early on, for example, when I was taking a distinguished TV presenter of advancing years out to lunch, I horrified restaurant staff by plonking myself down in the seat furthest from the door. This seat, known as *oku*, is for honoured guests. My appropriation of it was roughly the equivalent of pouring a pint of beer over the well-known personage’s head. (The host is supposed to sit with his back to the door, the position that in ancient times was most vulnerable to ninja attack.)

There were other things. Building workers did group calisthenics to piped music outside my house at 6am – something you don’t see

often in west London. I grappled too with a language that, in every way, seemed back to front and set with social landmines. I wondered at people's obsessive punctuality, politeness, cleanliness and the absolute seriousness with which they conducted every activity. I struggled to make anything but polite acquaintances, or even to make eye contact in the street.

More than these minor adjustments of culture, I was told almost daily by Japanese acquaintances that it was "difficult for westerners to understand Japan". Though sometimes purely an interviewee's attempt at obfuscation, there did seem to be a genuinely held belief that - in matters of economic and family relations, and in the spheres of aesthetics, morality and seating arrangements - Japan was radically different. No one bangs the drum of Japanese uniqueness more than the Japanese themselves.

So-called Nihonjinron, or meditations on Japaneseness, has a long tradition that reached fever pitch in the 1980s when some Japanese became convinced that their innate superiority was playing out on the stage of global capitalism. At its worst, Nihonjinron builds on the phoney concept of a racially homogenous society - look at the faces on any Tokyo subway to dispel this myth - to create a thesis of a race apart. This would have it that the Japanese are co-operative rice farmers not garrulous hunter-gatherers; have unique sensitivities to nature; communicate without language; use instinct and "heart" rather than cold logic, and have a rarefied artistic awareness. Many people who know Japan would recognise some half-truths in these observations, but Nihonjinron elevates them into a world view.

Yet, just because the discussion can be taken to ridiculous, even objectionable, extremes, doesn't mean we should shun it altogether. Macfarlane's book made me think I should tackle the subject afresh.

In some ways, of course, it is only natural that Japan should appear an outlier. It is in a different category partly because it was the first non-western society to join the rich man's club, a position it secured when it amazed the world by trouncing Russia in war in 1905. Today's fellow Group of Seven members, the US, Canada, the UK, France, Germany and Italy, are distinct cultures all. But they have common antecedents in Greek and Roman civilisation and monotheistic Christianity. Japan's strongest influences are China and Buddhist-Confucianism, which overlay its own animistic Shinto, a folk religion with no revelatory text. In the G7, Japan does stick out. If, say, Mongolia suddenly became the world's second-biggest economy, there would be floods of books on Mongolian uniqueness: "The visiting executive should always approach the yurt from a south-westerly direction."

Nor is Japan by any means the only country whose inhabitants portray themselves as unique. The French and Americans wallow in their own supposed exceptionalism. The Russians believe only they can comprehend the Russian soul; the Chinese traditionally saw themselves as inhabitants of a supreme empire surrounded by semi-Sinified tributary nations and barbarians; the British harbour a feeling that their island status sets them apart.

As Japanese taxi drivers never tire of pointing out, Japan - like Britain - is an island. But at 120 miles from land, it is six times more "remote" than the UK, which lies just 21 miles from France. Thus, cultural influences from China and Korea tended to gestate and shift. Chinese pictograms were, for example, dismantled to form two entirely new alphabets, hiragana and katakana, while a new set of Japanese readings was imposed on the original Chinese characters.

This transformational tendency was exacerbated by long periods of

self-imposed isolation, including 200 years of *sakoku*, literally “locked country”. Only after the Meiji Restoration of 1868 was Japan flung open. Even then, save for the six-year American occupation from 1945, it was never colonised.

On the phone, Macfarlane had said that just as the isolated Galapagos Islands evolved rare fauna and flora, Japan’s geographic and historical isolation created a distinct culture. His overriding thesis was that, whereas other modern societies underwent a profound separation of the spiritual from the everyday world, no such split had taken place in Japan. Sumo, with its complex purification rituals, was both sport and religion. A garden was both nature and art. A temple was a place of worship in a country without faith. Japan even managed, he said, to be a one-party democracy.

In his book, Macfarlane detects the same “lack of partition” in business. The Japanese, he says, do not place economics outside the moral sphere as happens in the west, where there is a tendency to believe that an economy runs according to its own inalienable laws. Under the famous keiretsu system, now under severe strain, companies hold cross-shareholdings with each other, offering protection from pernicious market forces. In bigger companies – if not the smaller ones that employ the bulk of workers – lifers treat their company more like a family, joining at graduation and staying until retirement. There are company songs, company dormitories, company holidays and, of course, lots of company overtime and company drinking sessions. Masahiko Fujiwara, a well-known Japanese writer and advocate of Japanese exceptionalism, had told me: “I find the idea that a company belongs to its shareholders a terrifying piece of logic. A company belongs to its employees.”

Japan is often said to be uniquely – there’s that word again – group-

oriented. *The Shell-less Egg*, written in 1977, described Europeans and Americans as being like eggs with their own protective shell. The Japanese, by contrast, were shell-less, warm and sticky and unable to conceive of themselves other than in relation to family, village, workplace, superiors and inferiors, insiders and outsiders.

Yasuhiro Maehara, a former senior executive of the Bank of Japan who has spent long stints abroad, told me he didn't want to believe that Japan was different from anywhere else. Yet, whenever he returned to his homeland, he found an overwhelming sense of social obligation that he did not detect elsewhere. "I am constantly made aware of what I am expected to say or how I am expected to act in various contexts and environments. There is my *honne*, what I really feel, and my *tatemae*, the part I am supposed to show to the rest of the world."

Macfarlane says that, if Japanese people derive meaning only in relation to each other, the same is true of Japanese art. The haiku, a poem of just 17 syllables, for example, makes scant sense as standalone verse. One of the most celebrated haiku by the poet Basho, Japan's Wordsworth and Shakespeare rolled into one, is: "furu ike ya/ kawazu tobikomu/ mizu no oto." Hearn rendered it: "old pond/ frogs jumped in/ sound of water." In English, it is doggerel. The beauty in Japanese comes from its allusions; to the season, the setting, and the sound of water conveyed by the onomatopoeic "oto".

Macfarlane's explanation for what he describes as Japan's partition-less landscape is that, unlike other modern societies, it has never gone through what German philosopher Karl Jaspers termed an "axial age", "a separation creating a dynamic tension between this world of matter and another world of spirit". Japanese Shinto, he says, "rejected the philosophical idea of another separate world

... against which we judge our actions and direct our attempts at salvation". When I asked Japanese friends how, if at all, they conceived of god, one, a telephone clerk, said she thought of her dead grandmother. Another, Akira Chiba, a successful diplomat, said: "In Japan, gods are floating all around. Essentially, we live together with the gods."

I was still resisting the idea that Japan should be differently different, but I needed some moral support. I spoke to Ian Buruma, an expert on both Japan and China. One flaw in claims of Japanese uniqueness, he says, is that they fall into the trap, sprung by the Japanese themselves, of comparing Japan with western countries. "What you should compare it to is countries like China and Korea, and then it suddenly starts to look a lot less strange," he says. "Instead, Japan starts to look like a variation."

Buruma says Japan has deliberately sought to distance itself from China since the Mito school of the 17th century, which advocated Japanese isolation and sponsored a version of history focusing on the imperial line. Then, from the mid-19th century, when Japan became all too aware of western power, it sought to define itself against the great powers of the west.

Even the mighty China was succumbing to western hegemony in the opium wars. "As knowledge of the world grew, the Japanese began to realise that China was not the centre of the world, and to recognise the weaknesses of China," he says. "So they thought: 'We better start repositioning ourselves.'" Thus, Buruma argues, much of Japan's exceptionalism is a fairly recent construct. "The problem with foreigners analysing this who have not really lived in Japan is that they take at face value what the Japanese say about themselves."



Buruma once wrote a book, *A Japanese Mirror*, which appears to fit into the “bizarre Japan” school. It is a compendium of Japan’s sex-and-violence-drenched comics and films, so seemingly at odds with an otherwise prim and peaceful society.

For Macfarlane the “contradiction” between coyness and guiltless sex is another example of how Japan can be two things at once. In a lecture last year at London’s Asia House, he singled out attitudes to sex as one of five “proofs” that Japan was exceptional. Although prostitution was nominally banned in 1956, the “water trade” lives on in every Japanese town and city. “Pornography, extensive since the eighth century, is thought of as an art like any other,” says Macfarlane, “like cooking, calligraphy or sword fighting.”

But Buruma, whose book paddles in some of the stranger waters of Japanese behaviour, disputes that this is evidence of uniqueness. “The idea of a religious notion of sex as sinful doesn’t exist in China or Korea either,” he says. “The difference between east Asia and the Christian or Islamic world is that there is no concept of original sin. What you have, instead, is a sense of social propriety which means that pornography is not something people condemn for religious, but rather for social reasons.” Pornography has often been an outlet for Japanese intellectuals frustrated at their lack of impact on the political process, he says. “But I don’t think there is a deep cultural reason for that.”

In search of another sceptic, I arranged to meet Earl H. Kinmonth, an American academic who divides his time between Japan and the UK. Over a raw-fish supper, he professed to find the eccentricities of Britain’s class system every bit as puzzling as Japan’s supposed oddities. If the British were a different colour and spoke a difficult-to-learn language, he is convinced every American would find them

utterly bizarre.

Kinmonth says too much stress is placed on external differences, as if one were comparing the experience of riding in a Rolls-Royce versus a Ford Fiesta. “No matter how different it feels to be in a Roller, you are moving under the same principle. The physics are not different. People tend to get too hung up on the fittings and the trim without looking at the underlying dynamics.”

For instance, he says, Koreans and Japanese are outwardly very different. “Koreans tend to be much more emotional and expressive than the Japanese. They are the Latins of the Orient. It’s a cliché, but it’s largely true. If you go to a Korean and a Japanese funeral, the Japanese are all stiff upper lip, and the Koreans are wailing and gnashing their teeth. But that’s only like the difference between an English funeral and an Irish wake. What do you do with that? Other than to say, they are different fixtures.”

There is one habit of the Japanese, Kinmonth suggests, that might help explain the obsession with their supposed uniqueness. “The Japanese have a tendency to codify experience. They are more self-conscious,” he says. “It is easy to confuse this codification with the actual level of difference.”

That strikes me as a crucial observation. Some Japanese, for example, use the concept of *honne*, what one really thinks, and *tatemae*, the view one presents to the world, as evidence of a unique way of thinking. But every society, whether they codify it or not, differentiates between openly stated observations and secretly held opinions.

Likewise, the Japanese obsessively classify the four seasons, wearing different clothes, eating different fish and viewing different flowers

according to a strict timetable. A sunny day in early summer, late summer, early autumn and late autumn all have different names, proof - say some - that the Japanese are as sensitive to seasons as the Inuit are to snow. The calibration of seasonal change is, indeed, a delightful part of living in Japan. But it is often misconstrued. I would like ¥10,000 (£50) for each time I have been asked whether it is really true that, abroad, we have no seasons.

As I was nearing completion of this article, I sent a draft to a Japanese friend, Sahoko Kaji, a highly westernised scholar of European economics at the famous Keio University. Her reply, of which the following is an extract, revealed just what a tricky subject I had taken on. After polite praise of my efforts, she wrote: "Nobody can 'understand' Japan in the western sense of the word, because in Japan there is no absolute. I sometimes feel sorry watching westerners trying to define Japan or the Japanese in one way or another. There are even well-intended Japanese that use western terminology to 'explain' Japan in their usual effort to be nice to guests and foreigners.

"But it is futile. In Japan, one thing blends into another seamlessly. And importantly, nobody (no Japanese, anyway) worries about where the line is drawn. I would agree with the shell-less egg analogy. I cannot successfully engage in a conversation with a westerner without defining things and showing borders. And yet, I am certainly Japanese, in the sense that I stand back and 'marvel' at westerners who keep trying to define this undefinable thing called Japan. Why bother? You cannot do it. I will not attempt it."

One of the best descriptions I have read of someone trying to "understand" Japan compared the process to peeling an onion. The cultural explorer pulls back layer after layer looking for Japan's

inner meaning, without realising that the meaning is to be found in the discarded layers. At the centre of the onion is nothing.

I ended my search for Japanese exceptionalism at Ise Shrine, Shinto's most sacred site. About four hours by train from Tokyo, it is dedicated to Amaterasu Omikami, the sun goddess from whom Japan's imperial dynasty is said to have sprung. The site was supposedly founded in 4BC after the daughter of Emperor Suinin had wandered 20 years in search of a suitably beautiful location.

The shrine is not what one might expect - there are actually 125 shrines, each dedicated to different deities. Approaching the complex over a wooden bridge, which arcs over the sacred Isuzu river, one finds no obvious signs of structures, but rather hills of cedar, cyprus and pine. All the woodland is sacred. This is less St Paul's Cathedral or Blue Mosque, more Hyde Park with gods.

One of the smaller shrines, dedicated to the river's flowing water, looks like a stylish potting shed, yet feels hushed and sacred. A young couple - he in drainpipe black trousers, she in miniskirt and cut-off leather boots - pray quietly to the rocks inside. With no sense of irony, they bow twice, clap twice - to attract the attention of the gods - make a wish, and bow again.

I ask Noriko Nakamura, my guide, who the young couple imagine they are praying to. "More than a god, it is life," she answers. "It doesn't matter if there's a statue or not. Shinto is a way of living, not a religion. I think this is unique to Japan."

Like all the wooden structures, Naiku is rebuilt every 20 years to exact specifications, a 1,300-year-old ritual that ensures it is always new and always old, simultaneously. Ceremonies are held to ask the trees' permission to cut them down for construction.

The nearest a commoner can get to the inner temple is a carefully laid-out stone garden, with a wooden torii gate, a thatch-roofed building and some cedars. But if one were to enter, one would find - or so it is said - one of the most holy objects in Japan. Inside is housed the Sacred Mirror which, along with the Sacred Sword and the Sacred Jewel, are presented, in secret, to each new emperor. The sun goddess sent the three treasures to earth in an act that forever cemented Japan's divine status.

The symbolism at Ise is perfect for a country that is wont to see itself as a nation apart, one that makes sense only in reference to itself. For if the Japanese were ever allowed to enter their most holy sanctuary - and they are not - what they would see, reflected back, is an image of themselves.

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