



Personal Health in Japan, a Lifestyle of Contradicting Habits

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El tema de la salud personal se ha convertido en un asunto candente en los medios de comunicación y el mundo médico de hoy.... Un mensaje que no podemos confundir es el hecho de que los americanos enfrentamos graves problemas de salud que debemos de hacer ajustes a nuestras opciones de la forma de vida que llevamos o el resultado será desafortunado. En contraste, los japoneses tienen una de las vidas más sanas del mundo. Viven más en comparación con otros países. Sin duda alguna tienen la dieta alimenticia más sana, pero si consideramos el hecho de que su imperecedera dedicación al trabajo los conduce a menudo a ejercer doce o trece horas al día en la oficina, es el estilo de vida japonés realmente tan sano como pensamos? La siguiente nota, producto de mi observación, aborda los conceptos de nutrición y de la cultura del trabajo en la sociedad japonesa.

The issue of personal health has become a hot topic in the news media and the medical world today. Researchers release new data every week regarding the health issues that we face, which often leaves the public confused, reading mixed messages and contradicting results about how to ensure a long, healthy life. One message we cannot confuse is the fact that Americans face grave (serious) health problems and we must make adjustments to our lifestyle choices or the result will be an unfortunate one. In contrast, the Japanese are some

of the healthiest people in the world. They have one of the longest life spans compared with other countries. There is no question their diet is the healthiest, but if we consider the fact that their undying devotion to their work often drives them to exert twelve or thirteen hour days at the office, is the Japanese lifestyle really as healthy as we think? The following are my observations, reflecting on the concepts of nutrition and work culture in Japanese society.

Where's the Main Course?

I once read that Japanese people have one of the longest life expectancies in the world. I later found a study which projected that nine out of ten American men and seven out of ten American women are expected to eventually become overweight. This statistic is nothing less than terrifying.

I've seen no more than twenty five overweight people in Japan in the last nine months and a majority of them were in the Sumo ring. Yet, anyone who has visited Japan can tell you that Japanese people are not healthy in every aspect of their lives. Sixty percent of the Japanese people I know are smokers. It is a huge part of the culture and the daily lives of the Japanese people. Some of them smoke an entire pack of cigarettes a day and an evening out at an izakaya, a rowdy Japanese style pub, inevitably makes you feel as if you have smoked almost a pack yourself.

In addition to demolishing their lungs, they work harder than people from many other countries. Having logged three or four hours of sleep, my students often come to class exhausted. They have the least amount of vacation time in the world, coupled with one or two hour commutes in the metro areas. As a result, their stress levels are exceptionally high. When the businessman leaves the bar, he wanders the streets looking like a boy on his twenty first birthday. A few hours later, he wakes up at 6am and starts the routine all over again. So, while the Japanese are annihilating their livers and their lungs and clocking overtime that is inconceivable to a Westerner, they are still the healthiest in the world and living longer than most Americans. They must be doing something right. In my opinion, it comes down to the food. It's what they eat, it's how they eat and it's how much they eat.

My first night in Japan at a restaurant with friends I muttered, "Uh...did we accidentally order off the kids menu?" when the tiny plate of Japanese noodles to be shared arrived at the table. I found the portion sizes shocking because I hail from the land of bottomless coke refills and heaping plates of burgers and fries, where one restaurant must offer an equally or more insanely gigantic portion size to compete with the establishment next door. Initially I feared I might starve in this country, but now it seems ridiculous to desire that amount of food.

In Japan, if you go to McDonalds and ask for a free refill, as my Japanese friend



who studied in the United States once did, they will chuckle, under their breath with restraint, of course. It is simply unimaginable to them why anyone should need three liters of soda. Even Starbucks, which has become prominent in Tokyo and all over the world, changes to suit its customers. Here, the smallest size is the 8 ounce cup and the large does not even approach the size they give you in the United States.

Indeed, portion size is a key difference between the American and Japanese diets, but what about the actual food they are eating? They consider almost everything that comes out of the sea a temptation and most of it is very healthy. The staples of rice and fish are often paired with green tea, miso soup, tofu, seaweed and a variety of pickled vegetables. The new, trendy cooking ingredient, which can also be used in desserts, is called Kanten and is made from seaweed, packed with fiber, has zero calories and supposedly lowers your cholesterol and blood pressure. Yes, you can find this in an ice cream sundae! Indeed, bags of chips and Hagen Daz are ubiquitous at the grocery store but none of them even approach the size of those in American stores and are shockingly small to most travelers from the States. If you need a quick bite here, Western fast food chains are an option but for the same 500 yen, you can get a rice bowl or a bento box filled with vegetables and sushi.

Finally, the difference is how they eat. During training, it was easy to tell who had already spent time in Japan and who was fresh off the plane from North America, Europe or Australia. Those who had just arrived expected to order their own plate and simply eat that. In Japan, this doesn't really happen. When you go out for dinner, you usually order an assortment of plates and pass them around, sampling different foods from each plate. This does not allow a plate of food to stare you in the face which you feel compelled to finish.

But wait... some Japanese people eat rice three times a day while some Americans cut all the rice out of their diet because they fear that carbohydrates are the ultimate sin. What's the difference? Maybe the Japanese just move more. In Tokyo, very few people drive cars. With the most efficient train system in the world and a \$2,000 fee for a license, who's going to bother with a car? You must walk or bike everywhere. Americans will pay thousands of dollars for weight watchers but will pass up a parking space at the mall because it is too far to walk, and some Americans will spend two hours at the gym only to slide through Starbucks drive through afterwards and pick up 1,000 calories worth of a sweet coffee drink as a reward.

In the wonderful city of New York you can't smoke in a bar because it is bad for your health and others but you can order a massive pile of French fries coated in grease and salt and put yourself one year closer to acquiring heart disease in a cheap and easy ten minutes. Although a recent ban on trans fats in NYC restaurants has slightly alleviated the problem, if something does not change, the health of Americans is going to continue in the same dangerous direction that it is going now. On the other side of the world, while the Japanese continue to smoke and drink excessively, if you try to put a hamburger from TGI



Fridays in front of them, most will consume half of it and balk at the thought of finishing it. If New York City is going to prohibit smoking in bars for health reasons, why not prohibit Big Macs and the Big Gulp at 7-11? Or how about a warning label at least? In the long run, my guess is that these will prove to be just as deadly for America.

Thank you for your good work

Oksaresama deshita! This is the phrase that can be heard anywhere, anytime after six o'clock in the evening as people begin to finish work. If you go to a beer factory, a noisy after work drinking establishment, the entire restaurant will thank you for your good work as the waiter announces your fist drink of the night. This phrase, in itself, says so much about the Japanese. While many Westerns work to live, the Japanese live to work. I previously believed that I must truly understand this phenomenon to articulate it but I have realized that we will never understand it because I am a Westerner.

Before the Shinkansen leave Tokyo station, the cleaning lady quietly awaits and bows to those getting off. As soon as the last traveler exits the train, she sprints down the aisles, turning the chairs around and picking up every tiny piece of trash with an intense determination to do the best job that she possibly can and it is not because her supervisor is watching. The Japanese take their jobs very seriously, and I am convinced that this is why they have the uncanny ability to fall asleep anywhere, after their hard work. I have seen them asleep while standing on the train, on the table in a café and in a ski lodge. On more than one occasion, my students have left my class at nine pm only to return to work and finish a report probably until the last train.

I have a front row seat to witness this mystery in my coworkers. On the extreme end, I have not been unheard of for some of them to pass an entire night and morning at work and be working hard when the others arrive at noon the next day. More often though, they will come out for drinks and good times on a Saturday evening and will go back to the office to complete their work into the early morning hours. At times, along with the other foreign teacher, I have been able to find the humor in this because it is so dramatically different from anything we have ever seen.

In Japan, your company, in some ways, takes the place of your family, especially for those businessmen who, unlike Americans, will not rush home for a family dinner at 5 pm. Rather they will continue to negotiate business and strengthen professional ties well past dinnertime. The Japanese salaryman usually works for the same company his whole life. Even in the case of my company, if a coworker decides to quit and leave the company, he or she is, in some ways dropping the trust and hurting those who have spent countless hours working with him or her. If that person has been to college or spent some time abroad in a Western country, the co-workers can recognize that she has been westernized and is showing this in her individualistic attitude about quitting and this often makes her unpopular among her coworkers.



Sadly, the real evidence of the intense Japanese work ethic lies in the suicides that occur on a disturbingly frequent basis. Often a businessman who is facing enormous pressure at work will jump in front of a train, usually the Chuo line, labeled Tokyo's suicide train for a number of reasons. As the word 'accident' flashes on a train timetables, commuters consider it nothing more than an inconvenience and late slips would be the ultimate crisis in the life of a salaryman.

Now that I have seen firsthand the way that the Japanese throw themselves into their work no matter what they are doing, I no longer wonder why Japan is one of the wealthiest countries in the world and has produced more of the works advanced electronics than anywhere else. They simply do not stop working. Their work consumes their lives. The recent train crash in Osaka can be blamed on the pressure and responsibility a Japan Rail conductor faced to do his job the right way and to get the train to the station on time. In most places a train arriving 30 seconds late would be considered on time, in Japan, that train is late... but is it really worth it?

