

ON LEARNING *NIHONGO*

by Gordon Peacock

“You’re travelling light” said the check-in clerk at the Japan Airlines desk at Heathrow as my rucksack just tipped the digital display over six kilograms. It did indeed seem rather a small amount of luggage to support a four-week journey through Japan, but it was too late for second thoughts. In any case none was needed, for everything had been checked a dozen times, from the tiny magnifying glass that I thought would come in useful for reading Japanese timetables (and did), to the long silk underpants I thought I would need in the snows of Hokkaido (but didn’t).

It was the spring of 1991. Though I didn’t know it at the time, my preparations had begun nearly three years before when an idea which had been floating, no bigger than a man’s hand, in the recesses of my mind suddenly grew large and clear. “How about retiring early?” I said to myself. The more I thought of it the more it seemed a good idea. The wheels were set in motion, and on 30 November 1988 with a deep breath and some sadness I closed the door of my office in Stirling University Library for the last time.

I had already enrolled for semester one Japanese, expecting to give one or two hours a day at the most to this new interest. Long before semester one was over I knew that this modest commitment of time would not take me very far. Gradually other interests fell by the wayside until Japanese became a major preoccupation. Like all serious students of the language I became a compulsive learner of the *joyo kanji*, the 2000 or so characters that form the basis of modern written Japanese (there are thousands more). Having laboriously transcribed them onto 2000 slips of paper, I would make sure that I always had a pack of 100 slips with me so that wherever I was, on buses, on trains, in dentists’ waiting rooms or the loo, no opportunity for memorizing them would be lost. Had I considered more carefully what subject would be suitable for a mature student returning to the classroom after a gap of thirty years, I might have chosen a subject where maturity of judgment counted for a lot and the ability to remember meaningless shapes for very little. By the time I had discovered my mistake however, it was too late. I was already addicted.

When I started Japanese I had given no thought at all to what I would do in semester six, which was to be spent at a Japanese university. If the truth were known, I had not expected to survive to semester six. But I did survive, and the question arose: what would I do? It was not possible for me to spend a whole semester away with the rest of my class, but I was able to spend a month travelling through Japan on my own. I travelled as far south as Hiroshima and as far north as Asahikawa in the northern island of Hokkaido. In Sapporo I stayed with a Japanese family, Akemi and Tsuyoshi Sakamoto and their three small daughters, who entertained me with much kindness and generosity.

To the first-time traveller in Japan everything is interesting. My particular interest however was the religious life of the Japanese people, so I found myself spending many hours at shrines and temples. From a speeding *shinkansen* I saw a farmer in a straw hat tending a little wayside shrine. I patted the beautiful sacred deer at Nara. I climbed inside the bronze Buddha at Kamakura and looked out of its head. I stood fascinated as a Shinto priest, resplendent in robes of turquoise and white, drove demons from a taxi. I watched parents bring a one-month old child to be introduced to the god of the locality. I read the wooden prayer tablets, called *ema*, that hang from racks before every shrine, reminders that human

need is the same the world over. At a place where God was invoked in the form of a bull I watched an elderly lady lovingly stroke the bronze image and transfer its healing power to her shoulders. In the Shinshoji temple at Narita I joined several hundred worshippers at the *goma* fire ritual, sitting as inconspicuously as I could in a corner of the huge matted floor, my shoes in a plastic bag. I visited Tenri, a town whose main reason for existence is as the headquarters of Tenrikyo, one of the many hundreds of new religions that are to be found in Japan.

I looked forward particularly to meeting Japanese Christians. The exclusive claims of Christianity are alien to Japanese ways of thought, and fewer than one percent of Japanese are Christians. Nevertheless the Christian church has a respected place in Japanese society. I was relieved to find that Japanese hymnbooks are largely in *hiragana*, a form of written Japanese that is (relatively!) easy to read. As most Japanese hymns are translations of traditional English hymns and are sung to familiar tunes, I got on famously (once I had grasped that the lines were *takegaki*, that is, running vertically from top to bottom and then from right to left). On Easter morning I attended a service of Holy Communion at the Hiroshima Nagarekawa Church, a most moving occasion. At the end of the service I was introduced to the congregation and given a round of applause. I gave them a respectful bow in return. Towards the end of my stay I attended the Sapporo Kirisuto Kyodan Church, where I was invited to address the congregation. From somewhere I found a minute or two of connected Japanese which was no doubt full of mistakes but appeared to be well received. Here my reward was an invitation to a noodle lunch.

That afternoon I took the cablecar to Mr Moiwa. As I sat in the spring sunshine my working life in Stirling University Library seemed as distant as the snowy peaks of the Daisetsu mountains that I could see far to the north across the Ishikari plain. Twenty-five years earlier I had been present, as one of the first members of staff, at the inauguration ceremony for the new university, the only completely new institution of its kind to be established in Scotland since 1582. Now I am one of the first four Stirling students to have completed a degree course in Japanese. Two rare privileges indeed.

Sadly those who studied Japanese at Stirling will remain a select band. The Centre for Japanese Studies there did not survive into the twenty-first century, becoming a victim of public expenditure constraints, a perception among school leavers that there must be easier ways of getting a degree, and a national indifference to the importance of foreign languages. As the world's economic, commercial and industrial centre of gravity moves slowly eastwards, we may come to regret our reputation as the language dunces of Europe.

Perhaps the time has come for a new institution to repeat the achievement of the Joint Services School for Linguists which in the nineteen-fifties taught Russian to some 5000 servicemen, enabling most to become competent speakers and translators in seven months and a select few to reach interpreter level in eighteen. Those of us who experienced the process probably resented the loss of our liberty. On the other hand, we enjoyed free board and lodging, emerged with a highly marketable skill and could begin our chosen careers without a mountain of student debt. More importantly, some of us discovered that languages were fun!

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