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I was a lot younger, when I sort of began to see that things are not as we see them and not nearly as they appear to be ... How much different could Japan and the Japanese be, while observing those entities with the eyes of a foreigner, who hails from a small, a pocket European country so to speak, which does not count more than 2 million inhabitants, measures a good 20,000 square kilometres, gained its independence some 15 years ago and up to this date remains quite an enigma in the European and virtually unknown in the consciousness of the worldly mind ?

As I had to decide where to conduct my studies, I thought about the USA at first, but after carefully thinking through the corpus of possibilities and expectations, changed my sight to Japan and came to a final decision within mere moments; the decisive arguments being Japan's role as the leading research and developmental power of the world. Although all arrows pointed to "Yes" to a sensitive and resourceful mind, the surroundings I hail from understood my choice as a highly unusual one. It surely raised a lot of interest and, as for myself, represented a significant change in life. Our culture is full of stereotypical notions about Japan: it is regarded as a country based on futuristic development and ancient tradition, decent efficiency on one side and the adaptability to the leading economic and other significant demands of the western world. The current image of Japan perceived by where I come from is a mosaic of incorporated information about traditional architecture, geishas and haiku poetry. It's basically the picture an average European gets through watching TV, surfing the Internet; summa summarum, broadening his or her mind.

I consciously did not want to rely on such a thwarted image, thus I gained some crucial practical information from a guidebook, willing to get acquainted to where I landed on the spot. Well, one year is quite a substantial amount of time to gain insight and process as much information about the surroundings you ought to become one with. I caught the first glimpse of what I was to expect, as I, despite being awake all through the flight, admired

the sun rise over Japan and while taking a closer look, ran my eye over the shape of Japan's coast, the ships and Kansai Airport, which was getting, oh, so close. As a new day dawned, I smilingly thought to myself: »Well, some romantic ideas about the country I am about to live in for a while, do seem to be true.« Japan may be far away, but is really so different and obstinate as our culture is made to believe? The formalities at the airport let had let me know what I should encounter a lot during the following days, namely the exceptional friendliness, consistency and efficiency of the Japanese.

I left Slovenia in mid-winter conditions with 5 inches of snow covering the landscape, that's why I got to sweat a lot because I arrived dressed up perfectly for winter conditions (and I was advised to do so in the handbook) and was greeted by autumn temperatures. This mild climate is really appealing, are the words that cross my mind while I admire the surroundings through the train window.

My newfound residence is the Kyoto International Student House, Sakyo-ku, and with regards to my previous travel experience through Europe, I have to admit that students do not encounter very much luxury at all. The apartment interiors are old and worn out and there is no sign of technological wonders; they have a computer room and one ADSL line for guests, but what raises my hopes are ideal research conditions my host faculty has to offer.

Wintertime falls over us during the next days, but there is no central heating, or at least not the kind we are used to in Slovenia. The heating system does not work, yet I am friendly assisted with an electrical heater and an extra blanket, which are not much of a help since it is windy and cold to the bone outside. Where is the mild climate now?!

As one takes a walk through the streets, one can see so much: things are so near and there is a whole lot of them but there are also certain small matters that catch the eye. It is always best to look at trees and not see the forest, then the other way around, that is, strolling around Kyoto and getting acquainted with it step by step, while at the same time grasping the image of where I actually am.

The buildings. Of course, they are most frequent things I see - some of them are old, traditional, remains of the past waved in the city; the others are contemporary constructions, also divided into two groups, the first being low, private houses and the other encompassing higher multi-story buildings (on a side-note; there do not seem to be any mind-bogglingly high skyscrapers in Kyoto). which as it appears to me point out an interesting interaction between low and high buildings, giving the city quite a lively appearance. The promenades are as wide as

UNCLEAR MEANING
HL. OR DO YOU MEAN woven into the city?

are in Europe and the back streets branch into many smaller ones, where there are mostly private houses. What is more, many buildings appear box-shaped; the advantage being on the side of functionality.

There is a magnificent forest spreading in the outskirts of the city. I am very much surprised by the leafiness of the trees at autumn's end and even more by their splendid colors, spreading from sunshine-yellow to Bordeaux-red. Since I still am a bit cautious, my main interest lies in exploring the nearest surroundings. I am glad to be living near the outskirts of the city, amidst private houses, which seem to be sort of connected, and the alleys spread around homeliness; there is lots and lots of greenness, blooming pot plants and small backyards. Very much like home!

When there is sunshine, it is especially pleasant to investigate what more there is around me –

an amazing number of shops (flower shops, dry cleaners and launderettes, small restaurants, fish markets, stationers and jewelers shops). It appears that many of Kyoto's inhabitants are self-employed and services activity is the main source of income. Such a neighborhood is quite rounded up and an apparently self-sufficient unit, since you have everything at reach – from schools to the pharmacist's. I am curious how one can earn enough in such a secluded unit, how profitable are the shops, respectively.

There seems to be one of the prevailing food shops every half mile (24/7 shops), so there are less department stores than one comes across in my hometown. I have also not yet encountered a mob on a shopping spree. As probably every foreigner, I miss the morning paper and the European tobacco shops; there are just vendors and drink dispensers and if one is persistent enough, one can find a specialized cigarette shop carrying smoking utensils. Luckily, I came across *The Japan Times* in English, satisfied, as I do not watch TV.

It has to be pointed out, that Japanese are very good neighbors. It is always a privilege to find how eager they are to help, how free they are to give any kind of information, although many cannot speak English and I cannot speak Japanese. Europeans find the Japanese very strict and earnest people. When they do not smile, they appear to us, as if they were angry – but that is just a picture living in the minds of the European population. I must exclaim that I have never ever before met such friendly people, and they are not only friendly to strange foreigners such as I may be, but to each other as well. Their encounters appear to me as rituals of politeness. One does not have to master the language to see that there

are special and unique forms of conversation going on. Despite being foreign, I have not yet had the feeling of being redundant in any place, everyone I have met up to this point made me feel welcome. Another aspect of the culture I landed in is cleanliness. Nowhere in Europe have I ever seen such pedantry when it comes to keeping ones threshold clean. There is a sense in the air, that keeping the streets, the homes, the whole environment clean is a leading aspect of everyday life. It reflects how one respects oneself and others.

And then there is the traffic, an overwhelming and important thing for a foreigner, because it has its specifics. As I got a cab soon after landing, I needed a couple of minutes to adjust to the new regime. The driver was sitting on my right but the conclusion kicked it after another couple of minutes. After fighting off the jet lag, there came the revelation. It is the same traffic regime as in Britain. Well, a normal thing, after you are finally fully aware of the differences. But until one reaches this point, some small encounters, like e.g. crossing the road, waiting for the bus on the wrong side, etc., precede the assimilation. Fortunately, I am not driving a car here yet.

The basic regime (signs, lights) is the same as in Slovenia. The promenades appear the same as in all big cities. They seem equally long and wide, and the buildings on either side look very much alike. There is another slight problem though – language; signs are mostly

in Japanese writing and because there are so many, one easily overlooks the fact that the names of roads and streets are also written in Latin letters. The countless signs do not appear as advertisements to me. They basically do not affect or address me since I am illiterate when it comes to Kanji, Hiragana or Katakana, yet I find the manner of writing very esthetic and appealing.

I am delighted about the pavements, which are plastered on main streets and, to my amazement, even and the roads smooth and polished. There are no crowds or traffic jams, no stress and no rage. I have this strange feeling that there is a lot less traffic than in my hometown, which counts no more than 100,000 inhabitants. How is this possible?

I must admit I was expecting to see many vehicles of indigenous production. Here and there a Peugeot, maybe a Mercedes, but that is already it. I have fancied Japanese cars for some time now, and I am glad to have the opportunity to get a close look. I was a bit surprised though, to see so many new and well cared for vehicles. It may not be more than five years ago, when my colleagues for the Faculty admired a small Japanese one-seater, parked in front of the

main building. The car stunned everyone with its shape and functionality, something we were not accustomed to. But there ^{are} a lot of them here. I say to myself as I pass by smilingly. Three or four manufacturers appear to prevail. It looks like Mazdas are expensive even here.

I find the palette of colors very unusual: black, white, gray and every other in between. No bright choice, if somebody should ask me. I am almost shocked to think ^{HLV} that Mazda surprised the European market with very lively colors and daring combinations. After all I have seen up to now, I am not at all surprised to see no bumped or otherwise damaged cars, something, that is a frequent and not at all pleasant experience in my hometown, especially, when one goes to the supermarket. The Japanese impress me as patient, cultured and polite drivers.

I was furthermore expecting to see numerous motorbikes, scooters and vespas, mostly because I have grown fond of the image of fast and strong Japanese bikes. Another revelation ^{was} let me know, that there are not that many of them around here. Some of them are, if I may express myself in such manner, old. The first, not very pleasant impression I got, involved a couple of bicycle-riders. A bike seems to be the most appropriate means of transportation for many students I met here on campus. Although his or her style of driving may appear aggressive, no one seems to get hurt or violated in any way. You may get a bit of a scare ^{HLV} though.

The bus is also a practical means of transportation. It is reliable, cheap and practical. Although I detect many who express displeasure about its unpunctuality, I personally like to use it, first and foremost, to look around. I finally got fond of it, after I figured out how to pay for the ticket. A foreigner always thinks of novelties as something peculiar, but when the adaptation is complete, he or she accepts them the way the natives ^{do}. At least I hope so.

It is often said ^{HLV}, that too much ~~of~~ good is not good at all. To be more precise – I have to write about something that I rather would not have experienced. Sadly.

A couple of days ago, I stood at a pedestrian crossing, waiting for the traffic light to change. A man and his young son stood near by and the boy just could not take his eyes off my face. When his father became aware of that, he pulled him aside and began explaining something very intensively. A child of his age normally finds strange and foreign things and people quite interesting, and he kept staring at me, while his father was telling him I do not know what kinds of things and giving him who knows what crucial advice and facts about the presence of

foreigners. This is what I presume, after seeing the father holding his son's arm very tightly, while I at the same time found the situation getting more and more embarrassing for me. Well, a bad experience.

There is ^{also} a commentary or an article in the daily newspaper ^{about} homicides of children, the last one just occurred ^{HLV} in Kyoto. As I already knew and had experienced in the past weeks, Japanese families tend to take special care of their children, ^{and so} it is understandable, ^{HLV} that the statistics of violent deaths of children, which has ^{also} recently risen up to 30 per year, arouse ^{HLV} much worry. I hail from a country, ^{HLV} where there is a yearly average of 30 children dying in traffic accidents (we are a nation of just under 2 million inhabitants), ^{but} at the same time we have the lowest birth rate in Europe. I thoroughly read all the news about that topic.

Experts in different fields are in constant search for explanations and solutions. The matter is serious and difficult to explain. Children are dependent and the weakest ^{members (or) links} of our society. The more traditional a society is, the more it focuses on caring for ^{its} the frail offspring. Contemporary societies also frequently ^{generate} come across ^{social phenomena} paradox appearances, such as: sexual and other kinds of violence against children, ^{encompassing} all through to horrid murders, torture of children and elder people, etc. These homicides are arousing extra concern, while sadly becoming more frequent. As I can obtain from articles about trials, the culprits are mainly adult males, and only one ^{stands out} exception among them – a deranged foreigner, ^{giving rise to} thus there is (by fault of TV correspondence, as it says in newspapers) an absurd campaign against foreigners ^{going on}, who are branded possible perpetrators. The fact is, that all of those criminals are mentally and differently ^{unstable}, thus a certain question forces itself into the open: what is the reason of this horridness and what can be done to prevent and ^{ultimately} in the end stop it?

I started ^{to} ~~develop~~ the ^{shared} ~~shared~~ thought about children by ^{acknowledging} knowing that they are helpless when compared to adults. What will follow, as thoughts of someone who is merely an observer on the side, may not please the reader. Japan is known worldwide for its ^{craze for comics} comic craze – ^{not only} read by young people but adult men as well, and almost anywhere: in restaurants, shops, bookstores ... Among these comics is a special kind, emphasizing female characters, who are ^{feature} very childlike in appearance, and those comics contain sexual content. The male characters are portrayed performing different kinds of sexual acts on the female ones, the ^{later} mostly being subordinate and exploited, while ^{if} violence appears to be the background. What is more, the female characters look like children ^{every} in any way (the exception being sexual attributes, ^{which} can be seen in front of or in a

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* I am delighted about the pavements^①, which are plastered^② on main streets and, to my amazement, even^③ and the roads^④ smooth and polished^⑤.

① pavements.

British English

American English



pavement = hard covering of the road.
in U.S. English
They often say 'sidewalk(s)'.

② German 'geplastert'?

English: 'paved'

→ I am delighted about the pavements, which on main streets are fully paved, ~~and as~~ and, to my amazement, even the roads are smooth and well-surfaced.

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⊙ I started the topic of children by acknowledging that they are helpless when compared to adults.

bookstore, where there is a special compartment with such comics, whose content is initially visible on the covers). But let us leave the fact aside ^{the fact} that the circle of "readers" is rather limited and that the comics are taped together, so they can be purchased exclusively by adults and one can understand that they are some sort of means of living out sexual frustrations.

leave aside the fact that

In Europe, where there is an intensive protection of children against sexual and other kinds of violence on the minds of the communities and the same time a hunt against pedophilia taking place, something like that would not be possible. The notions sex, violence and children do not have a common denominator.

Something like that would not be possible in Europe, where communities are ~~intensely~~ ^{keen} to protect children against sexual and other kinds of violence, and at the same time a hunt is taking place against pedophiles.

It is important ^{in Japanese comics} that the portrayed characters have the appearance of children, ^{HK} who are being sexually and mentally traumatized, and the message of all of that is: they cannot defend themselves. There are sick deviants lurking ~~around~~ ^{in every community, society} respectively, and a long special chapter could be ~~spent~~ ^{devoted to} when describing how they interpret the background message of such comics.

Even the "Cartoons" section in *The Japan Times*, ^{dealing with} "how ~~do~~ most Guys perceive Japanese women; are we all School Girls, Anime Princesses & Demure Geishas" /.../, makes one think. Since I am a foreigner, I am doing just that, while observing what is usually looked at, but not seen.

Even the Cartoons section in *The Japan Times* makes one think, with features showing how "we the guys perceive Japanese women", or how "we are all schoolgirls, anime princesses and demure geishas".

The Japanese are very polite people indeed; it has been a month or so since my arrival and I still have not changed my mind about what I just said in the introductory ^{columns} sentence, no matter what everyday encounter I was involved in with representatives of my host nation. Speaking of every day, my daily routine has steadily become more and more monotonous. I even figured out that there are currently 128 million inhabitants in this country, myself being included in that figure as a foreigner about to spend a whole year amidst them.

The temperatures have risen, ^{and so} thus the temperature in my apartment went up as well. If I put it a bit sarcastically, the warm air invaded my housing, driving the temperature in my room to room temperature. Yet I am still a bit unhappy about the heating system; no matter how hard I try, I cannot adjust to the fact that there is no central heating; this being the reason one feels cold all the time. I became acquainted with many Japanese things, yet it still remains a mystery to me why the indigenous solutions to this problem do not work (for us foreigners, that is). Is there anything wrong with the central heating system we use in Europe? I was given an electric blanket, thus I no longer have to sleep alone. I often read that several other Europeans who spend their time here complain about the same thing. Although I now have this "heating companion", that does not mean I shiver any less.

In my previous column, I wrote about superficial knowledge about Japan, but I have to make it very clear that Japan is very present in the life and minds of the Europeans, a lot more than the Japanese would ever expect it to be. What I wanted to point out is, how big the difference between reading or hearing about something respectively and actually experiencing it really is. Personally, I am referring to Japan.

You may got the image of me being a shivery creature, but for my defence, I was "fortunate" enough to visit Japan during the coldest winter since 1946. People at home are constantly asking me, via e-mail, how I cope when there is up to 12 feet of snow in certain areas of the country and constant news about people freezing to death. Unfortunately, this wintertime is an unpleasant exception and a part of Japan was hit very hard by it. To my questionable fortune I am about to visit that part, more precisely Sapporo, for a couple of days in February, and thus have the opportunity to

see the true picture ^{for} by myself.

One who finds himself in a new environment has to accustom ^{himself} to new circumstances, drop certain habits and expectations and take on new ones. To do the first, meaning, utterly destroying a system of already acquired habits, is far from easy, far from being possible to do in a short period of time, while the other demands even more time and struggle. And when you find yourself being caught between those two phases, you are somewhat stuck in a desert ... Why, this is exactly what happened to me. I have just experienced a time of countless holidays and celebrations that brought along a lot of free time and many possibilities to really spend it.

Christmas is basically a holiday of Christian descent and I expected that it would just be acknowledged as a holiday that is celebrated in other parts of the world. This is where I was wrong! Just like McDonald's, it made its way over the "big pond". Well, there were no heavily decorated Christmas trees of all sizes, no twaddle ornaments, no "Santas" standing in front of the entrance of each and every shopping centre, but there were loads of "Merry Christmas" signs and Christmastime-type formulations all over the place, which surprised me even more than scarcely decorated streets before New Year's Eve.

It is not that I miss the countless variations of Christmas trees or snowflake-shaped symbols respectively, which in Europe tend to thwart the whole image and exceed the boundaries of good taste (but I must say all of that is getting better and better each year where I come from). No, it is just that I am used to all that jazz letting me know in November, that Christmas is just around the corner ... Here - it is obviously a different tune. I do not regard the "Merry Christmas" signs as some sort of a western style invasion of the Japanese traditions, but more as a lack of content or conceptual emptiness of the whole linguistic construct; all that matters is celebrating it (even the English-speaking community has long forgotten the initial meaning of the first part of that syntagm and thus does not regard the holiday any differently). The signs are therefore more noticeable and because of the difference in writing look a lot like some sort of decoration or a commercial poster. All that put aside, it was nice to be able to buy a Christmas wreath and hang it on the door (the symbol itself originated far before Christianity, but nobody seems to care!), although it meant something totally different to me than to the shop owners who casually put it on

signs

