

Preface

What is this Book About?

This book reveals the lifestyle of the people of modern Japan. It describes how the Japanese perceive nature, the universe and themselves as well as how they interact with other people, their surroundings and the ideas of others. This book also discusses how the Japanese behave toward close friends and outsiders. In short, it answers the question of why the Japanese think and act in the ways that they do.

I have based my discussion on personal observations, impressions and thoughts accumulated over years of living in Japan which I find a very remarkable country. I have made use of the works of many talented authors, both Russian and non-Russian, who have studied and puzzled over Japanese culture.

Why Japan?

The growing interest in Japan is fueled by two main sources.

First, Japan is the only non-Western country to have achieved global economic success. Europeans and Americans are intrigued about how Japan has emerged among the world's leading nations. Westerners have a common stereotype that a non-Western country just cannot be as successful as Japan has been. Interest in Japan is further intensified by the media, researchers, writers and analysts throughout the world. Be it the "Made in Japan" automobiles and TV sets that are readily available in any country or the *Yamato-nadeshiko* women tiptoeing in kimono with ikebana in their hands at

every corner, the entire international community is interested in this extraordinary country.

Second, it is Japanese culture itself that fascinates the world. For centuries, Japan has been absorbing, like a giant sponge, all of the best of the outside world. Long periods of isolation gave Japan time for thoughtful absorption and further assimilation of the borrowed ideas and technology that were later polished into a uniquely Japanese style. The principle of social energy conservation says that the weakening of external links intensifies internal links. Through the efforts of several generations who knew almost nothing of the outside world, a unique cultural tradition was created in Japan. Out of isolation has evolved its unique attraction and allure. One hundred years ago, A. Nikolaev, a Russian traveler, wrote that Japan possesses “a gorgeous natural environment combined with the complete absence of serfdom and foreign domination [that] has endowed this nation with many valuable qualities in a combination that is rarely seen anywhere else” (Nikolaev, 1905).

Obviously, the best way to understand a culture is to live in it for several years, working with its people and observing their everyday lifestyle. Short-term visits, even if they are rather frequent, cannot provide this same opportunity. Japanese society is still tightly closed to outsiders, and foreigners usually find it difficult to assimilate. Therefore, the knowledge gained by those who have lived in Japan and who have managed to comprehend its culture from the inside is of considerable value. Notwithstanding every individual experience is necessarily limited and subjective, there are certain aspects that any foreigner cannot fail to notice while living in Japan. These shared observations and reflections can provide a detailed picture of this distinctive country and help to illuminate its uniqueness for all those interested in Japan. This is the main goal of this book.

What is the Main Idea?

The traditions, character and mentality of any nation are the result of its age-long development. These characteristics are an intricate combination of historical events and ethnological patterns. Any exclusive

national feature normally has its origins rooted in the past. However, it is not easy to explain these features adequately since human society is a result of complicated cause-and-effect relationships. People usually find it difficult to take an abstract view of the present or to comprehend fully the implications of the remote past. It is not easy to understand what really happened during those times; how did it happen and why? Japanese history is much better documented than that of many other countries, since manuscripts have always played an important role in Japanese culture. Our knowledge of Japanese history may be subtle but it is still sufficient to attempt looking into the changing times of Japan and exploring the mechanisms of and reasons for her transformations.

This book not only reveals the mentality and national character of the modern Japanese people but also tries to explore and to present the roots of their mannerisms. As you begin navigating Japanese culture, you might ask yourself several seemingly naïve questions. Everyone knows that the Japanese are generally more polite than people from other countries, but why is this so? Why does their behavior change so much when they are among strangers? Why do they relax so much when being served by others? Generally speaking, why is the service in Japan the best in the world? Why is their public transportation so accurate and dependable? Why do the Japanese like gift-giving but dislike disclosing their true thoughts and feelings? Why do they value loyalty and commitment so much? For how long have they done so? Why, when interrogated by the police, do they easily confess to crimes that they have not committed without being beaten or tortured? What are the reasons for such behaviors?

These are just a few of the many questions that can be answered by a survey of the history of Japanese society. I have included credible facts from historical and contemporary Japanese society to present a coherent picture in trying to comprehend the Japanese people.

What is NOT Included in this Book?

Knowing firsthand the difficulty of navigating the rough sea of literature today, I feel that it is helpful to inform you of what is not found

in this volume. There is no romanticism of Oriental martial arts which therefore receive very little mention. Thrilling legends about samurai warriors and intriguing secrets of the ancient past are left for other writers to explore. The inscrutable nature of ancient Oriental culture in its modern conception, as well as esoteric philosophy and sacred rituals, poeticism of everyday aestheticism, the unfathomable secrets of the enigmatic Japanese soul — all of these of a more exotic nature are not found here. If you imagine Japan as a crystal temple set in foamy white clouds, you should probably stop here.