

Editorial Comment

An Ungentler Japan

Everyone who lives in a foreign country has some adjustment problems, but many Japanese experience severe reverse culture shock when they return to Japan. Poor housing and sky-high food prices make you wonder why you came home again.

I've lived in the United States on six different occasions, spending about half of the last three years in Texas and California. My cultural reentry to Japan last autumn was the most difficult ever.

I suffered spatial disorientation, a psychological consequence of spending two academic semesters in Texas, where the wide open spaces stretch to the horizon. Even during a three-month stay in California, which is about the same size as Japan, I felt hemmed in compared to the Lone Star State. Back in Japan's crowded cities and my own tiny house, I feel claustrophobic.

The high cost of food here is infuriating. Everything is expensive – meat, fish, vegetables, fruit, rice – whether you eat at home or in a restaurant.

I thought my eyes were playing tricks on me when I saw a head of lettuce advertised for \$3.27 (\$1 = ¥122) at a local supermarket. Rainy weather last summer is blamed for high produce prices, but in Texas you could buy 12 heads for that price. The \$150 that some Japanese pay for one fancy melon would purchase several crates of cantaloupes in Austin.

In Osaka, I paid the equivalent of more than \$10 for a pork-cutlet lunch made from tough, tasteless frozen meat. I wanted to heave that greasy mess into the kitchen.

You can get a great meal in Japan for \$50 a person, but the portions are so small that you want a second or third helping. For \$50, four or five Texans can eat and drink in a neighborhood bar for hours.

The recent meat scandal in Japan – beef from diseased cows was sold as hamburger – was the final insult. Maybe Japanese athletes did so poorly

at the Seoul Olympics because they couldn't afford a good steak.

After living in Texas, where people dress casually, and Berkeley, where intellectuals are indifferent to how they look, it's hard to understand middle-aged Japanese who spend a small fortune on designer-brand clothes. Dressed like Beautiful People they live in unbearably cramped quarters.

Gasoline in Japan costs four times what it does in the United States, despite the drop of oil prices. And the exorbitant toll fees here are officially sanctioned highway robbery.

For \$30 in San Francisco, music lovers could attend a 10-concert symphony series commemorating the 200th anniversary of Mozart's death. In Hiroshima, a ticket for one concert costs \$40 or \$50. In Texas, I paid \$3 for a haircut, but here barbers get 10 times as much.

Because of the yen's appreciation, Japanese per capita income has nominally surpassed that of Americans. In real terms, however, our living standards are still less than half those in the United States. The expensive and inferior lifestyle of Japanese is caused by protectionism, the multilayered distribution system, and bureaucratic obstructionism.

Southern hospitality is ingrained in Texans, and they are friendly and kind. But in Japan, affluence has taken a toll on civility. Seeing what materialism and status-seeking have done to our values was the saddest part of my homecoming. Japan is not becoming a gentler society.

We have yet to learn the truism that 'Man doth not live by bread alone.' Unless we seek spiritual and cultural fulfillment, Japan's Gilded Age will turn out to be made of fool's gold.

Shigeo MINABE
Professor of Economics
Hiroshima University
(From the Chugoku Shimbun
October 17, 1988)