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Japan is Fascinating

The title of this essay –and of my powerpoints comes from the title of the reading “Japan is not interesting!” by Masao Miyoshi, assigned to us by Professor Stefan Tanaka on June 19 during the 2012 Japanese Studies Institute. Miyoshi’s question asking the reason many still were reluctant to visit Japan made me realized I just found the answer to many of the questions related to the Japanese issue: The great never realize how great they really are. This is true for Japan, and it is true, at times, even for the United States of America.

I am going to go back again to my multiple origins and I will be quick about it. Cameroonian by birth, I come from a very tiny country I thought few people knew. When I moved to France, my professor at my high school was very kind to me. He told me, “Yvette, we are very happy to have you here. Cameroonian students are always among our best ones.” Then I moved here in the United States from France. And when I told people I came from Paris France, they often responded, “me too!” They probably thought I was just trying to look interesting. Here in America, we are just happy to be US citizens. However, once, President Obama was being interviewed on TV, and he was heard saying that travelling around the world, he was realizing many would like to come to the US, and many would like to look like us Americans!

Back to Japan… We are 16 adults here in San Diego, California, with lives full of activities. Many of us are teaching –one colleague with whom I share a suite and I are among those; some here left babies less than two years old; some are directors of programs; some have teenage boys, and many left who knows what...–Not because Japan is not interesting. It is because Japan is so interesting in fact, that we left all that hanging to come and try to learn as much as we can about Japan from this Institute, and in turn, to take that back to our institutions for our students to benefit from what we acquired. This way, we will help our students learn more about this great country, the third economic power, which still makes many wonder, even today, “Just how did they do it?”

This country is not uninteresting. It is still fascinating to many. I organize an “International Day” every year at my University. This year, a student happened to cook a Japanese dish. I assumed she was Japanese, “half,” or former military who was stationed in Japan. The dish was delicious. It came wish a main dish, a side, a desert, and a Japanese drink. Needless to say, people consumed it fast. When I got to talking to her, I complimented her on the dish. Then I asked, “Are you Japanese?” She responded that she was not. To make a long story short, she told me she just loved Japanese culture, and thus, cooked Japanese food all the time. When I came here at the Institute, I told my daughters about the cooking books we were offered here and they told me they could not wait to use these to cook Japanese dishes for our family of four when I returned.

Here at the Institute, as we were engaging in the different activities prepared for us, our understanding of ‘How Japan did it’ was getting better in a way we did not think possible coming in. “Higurashi Sensei was on to something,” we were telling each other. We were beginning to see Japan in a brighter light, one we intended to also let shine once we got back to our respective institutions.

For me, I designed a syllabus which is going to be used for a new global literacy class designed for all entering freshmen at my university. During this class which will be an intro to global literacy, a week will be devoted to Japanese culture, and the last class will be reserved for a screening of a Japanese film. In this class, the students will be assigned to write a project on a Japanese company located either in the US or in Japan. In order to further help students in their awareness of Japanese culture, from now on, during our “International Day,” students who will volunteer to feature Japan will be offered more points than those who will feature other countries. This will be a way to stimulate Japanese interest among our undergraduate students.

The powerpoints enclosed to this summary expound on just a number of points, takeaways, I intend to use in order to help my students better understand Japanese culture. The binder Sensei prepared for us is a gold mine of resources and I will be using it to help my students more than I will use the textbooks I have been using till now. A deeper understanding of Japanese culture is what I aim to bring to our undergraduate students.

This has been a tremendous opportunity and I am grateful beyond words for the two weeks I spent here at the Japanese Studies Institute. It has been a life-changing experience and I will not see Japan from the same vantage point again; it is dawning on me many in the US do not know the Japanese; this might be the reason of their reluctance to visit Japan. I majored in International Business. Thus, I do research on Japan and teach my students about Japan and I did not know Japan. If this is true for me, I suspect it may be true for many who may not even have received the exposure I received. However, after the two weeks at the Japanese Institute, my feeling is that I acquired a greater understanding of who the Japanese are as a people; as a result, I am eager, now, to visit Japan, and to take my students to visit Japan. Now, I see in the Japanese, not just a great people but a great people with a great heart as well. One presenter from the Japanese Government Organizations in Washington D.C. mentioned the belief of their organization that promoting relationships between our two people could be achieved through three ways: Visibility, affinity, and understanding. I think the third part is the most difficult part. And this is the part in which we are fortunate enough to have gained the most, thanks to the Japanese Studies Institute.