

## Modor Escape 05 Japan | 魔都逃跑 05 日本



For a half breed sinologist, I have to admit, it took too long to eventually land on the shores of Japan. And after more than 15 years on and off in China, it feels somehow as if I did ignore Japan deliberately; or something unconscious made me avoid it; in particular, after watching throngs of foreign tourists visiting Kyoto's cultural heritage sites. I don't believe that my efforts to integrate into Chinese society have made me susceptible to nationalist anti-Japan brainwashing, but who knows which energy currents long term residents of China are exposed to... Our belated journey to the land of the cherry blossom could also be well explained by China being far too large and complex to understand, and thus me being incapable of mobilizing additional resources for its probably single most important neighbor nation. The truth will be somewhere between the former and the latter, but I have to admit that both my recent trips to Taiwan and Japan helped me considerably to understand China on a much deeper level. I can thus only recommend to any student of sinology or any China related discipline to take an early peek into China's neighboring Far-east Asian cousins. It will pay off.



Left: Anti Japan demonstration during Diaoyu Island conflict

Right: custom number plate on a Shanghai e-scooter which reads: Stay away from Japanese and Dogs

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We did split our 15 days in Japan into three parts: Industrial Nagoya in the very beginning, Mt. Fuji in between as an escape from the heat, and historical Kyoto in the very end. I spent at least three full and focused days preparing our itinerary and the more I read about Japan, the more I grew cautious about our travel preparations. Navigating a country, where basically only Japanese is spoken – and therefore no language which we can converse in – would be a novel experience to us. Having traveled extensively in Europe, North America and Asia, Japan definitely felt most alien and *sakoku*, that is: isolated. David Pilling writes that *when the Dalai Lama visits Japan, he is sometimes asked what would most benefit the country. Tibet's spiritual leader never fails to disappoint his audience. Instead of philosophy or religion, he has more practical advice on how Japan can better integrate with the world. 'Learn English,' he says.* Being responsible for our children and taking into consideration the high price levels, a well prepared itinerary was therefore mandatory, I felt, and Arthur Eisenhower crossed my mind not only once: *Every time that I prepared for a battle I have found plans are useless; but planning is indispensable.*

And so it turned out to be. I was glad I had done my homework. Things got quite often out of control and I had to let go not only once by skipping a temple afternoon visit in favor of an extended lunch followed by ice cream, but it was good to have my plan as a platform from which we could navigate – even though we ended now and then in some startling Zen paradigm. The weather did contribute: It was awfully hot that summer; for any kind of journey, but especially for a family holiday with our two restless children. It was in particular hot in Nara, where I understood why Japanese people sometimes have a passionate affinity for the boiling regions of India. Our children were thrilled nevertheless and nervously anticipated the promised deer freely roaming the park. [Daughter excitedly pointing at a map next to the train station 'There is the deer park!' Father drenched in sweat hauling the second born hopefully lifting his head 'They have a beer park?']. In Nara we also ran into a long haired, probably 55-year-old dude watering his wild, not at all Zen like front yard. Overhearing us speaking German he asked us in clearly distinguishable Eastern German accent where we were heading to. It turned out that he spent several years in the German province of Hessen. Later that evening we met him and his German wife, who had been living in Japan for 21 years, to chat some more. On parting I asked the couple jokingly if they ever perceived themselves as the axis of evil. He pondered for a moment and replied with a smirk that Adolf Hitler was Austrian after all.

Most countries I travel to for the first time, I try to understand upfront through one or two recommended books. The Financial Times staff has already once been a substantial aid in doing so: when I travelled to India for business purposes in 2008, I read the then recently published title [In Spite of the Gods](#) by FT's long time India correspondent Edward Luce. That read was of such enlightening impact that I didn't hesitate one second, when I read somewhere that a long time FT correspondent to Japan, named David Pilling, published

2015 a book titled [Bending Adversity](#). I bought, read and did enjoy. I am not an economist, but there is something I truly enjoy from a rational point of view, when journalists with a profound economic background report on a country. I read them as representatives of the humanities at their best, because they ideally combine their insights of sociological and collective psychological dynamics with the recorded data of the financial world. It was the historian Harari who wrote that the earliest records of written human activity are not poems or political treaties nor scientific papers, but simple accounting notes. There has to be something of intrinsic relevance to such information, which can't be dismissed.

Pilling had been on my reading list for more than a year, but working my way through Lonely Planet's Japan guidebook, I encountered in the movie and book recommendation section [A Different Kind of Luxury](#) by Andy Couturier. The subtitle 'Japanese Lessons in Simple Living and Inner Abundance' got me instantly interested. I bought, enjoyed, but till now I have finished only six out of eleven "case studies" Couturier has collected. As the author suggests himself, I slowed down reading, because it indeed takes some time to digest each one of the featured characters and their abundant philosophical mindset and practical life perspectives.

What did I know of Japan before we went there? To be honest: almost nothing. But then again, screening my memory, there are books, movies and many stereotypes that are worthwhile to spend some minutes on. I recall first of all reading Eugen Herrigel's [Zen in the Art of Archery](#), one of my all time top ten reads. It's the 80 something pages account of a German philosophy professor who spends with his wife a few years before WWII teaching in Tokyo and tries to understand Zen by practicing archery; his wife by the practice of [ikebana](#). I have a very fond memory of this book, because of its brevity and prosaic depth, and I believe it has formed my picture of Japan or what can be encountered in Japan equally deep as Michael Ende's Jim Button and Luke the Engine Driver, a children's book which I devoured first time at age 10. The famous German author had a life long fascination with Japan as I learnt much later, and used his impressions of the country to describe parts of Jim's journey around the globe. These images linger in my mind to this day.

I was never able to put this potential encounter in words, but Pilling quotes in Bending Adversity [Japan Through the Looking Glass](#) by Cambridge anthropology professor Alan Macfarlane, who managed to do so: Whereas other modern societies had gone through a profound separation of the spiritual from the everyday, *no such division ever took place in Japan. It never underwent what German philosopher Karl Jaspers called the 'Axial Age', a separation creating a dynamic tension between the world of matter and another world of spirit. Japan had no heaven or hell against which to benchmark its worldly actions. 'Japan rejected the philosophical idea of another separate world of the ideal and the good, a world of spirit separate from man and nature, against which we judge our actions and direct our*

*attempts at salvation.* In my own words I would say that Japan is probably the most monistic and industrialized society which can be encountered on this planet, and all the uniqueness which might be perceived from the one or other perspective is a consequence of this condition. The Japanese have a term proper for their uniqueness: [Nihonjinron](#). Pilling explains Nihonjinron as *the study of what it means to be Japanese. An exercise in exceptionalism, it underpins a strong Japanese sense of national identity but is often taken to fetishistic extremes*. Nihonjinron could be the Japanese version of what China claimed for hundreds of year for itself: cultural superiority.

There are also a few movies which contributed to the picture I had of Japan. [Lost in Translation](#) with Bill Murray showed me a Japan which I knew very well from China: the foreigner feeling like a spider in an ant hammock, the tall white guy lost in a sea of yellow dwarfs, estranged by pastime activities like KTV and Pachinko saloons. [Nokan](#), a pretty recent movie about a professional cellist who turns undertaker, poetically describes the art of funeral arrangement and [Suzako](#), a movie from the late 90ies shows the decay of a village community as the death of an organism. And of course [Spirited Away](#), to pick only one movie from the many produced by Hayao Miyazaki, about a girl who slides into a Buddhist inspired ghost world. All these movies conveyed to me this holistic and somehow mystical picture I have at the back of my head of Japan and only by reading about Karl Jasper's concept of the Axial Age I can make sense of this perception.

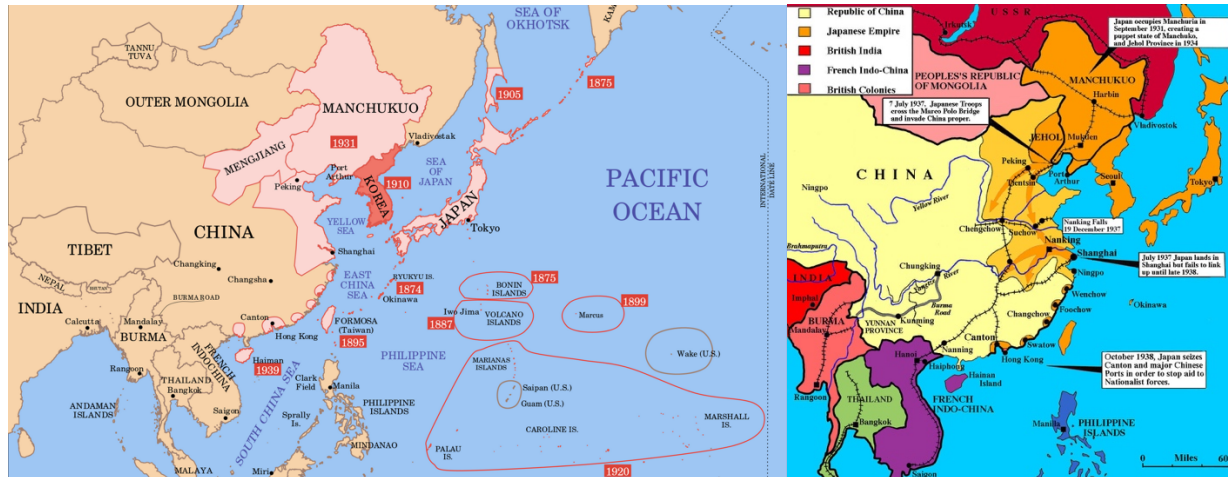
The concept of Japan not having undergone a separation between the spiritual and the profane alone makes it an interesting subject of study, but there are other qualities to Japan like its demographics, its degree of industrialization and its resulting macro economics, which are interesting to ponder on. Japan is in all these aspects a sort of frontrunner for other countries, and foreigners seem to be mostly drawn to Japan because they want to derive conclusions for the future of their own societies or humanity per se. I confess that my mind was loaded with many such thoughts throughout our journey across Japan. But what really stuck with me is this feeling that heaven and hell are both part of our profane lives; and that all Japanese creatures are enormous, except its people. We were astonished by the size of Japanese bugs and slugs, as we were stunned by its Lilliputian people. Women are petite and most men rather boyish compared to their Western counterparts. Being slim myself, I am not surprised anymore that I don't find my size at [Uniqlo](#) stores.

### Children of a Common Mother

Japan is surprisingly similar to China; I was amazed to actually see many more similarities than differences and realized that there has indeed been inflicted some brain washing upon me through my experiences in China. Chinese and Japanese share a large part of their culture, and I was reminded of the relationship between Great Britain and the US. There is

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a large memorial at the border between Washington State and British Columbia, which reads to border crossing motorists as such: *Children of a common mother*. Great Britain is to the US and Canada probably in a similar relationship as China to Japan and Korea. 2001 memories of my Chinese students being infuriated by nationalist propaganda movies about the atrocities committed by the Japanese army in 1937 in Nanjing faded insofar over witnessing delighted Chinese tourists taking photographs of Tang dynasty temples in Kyoto and recognizing their own culture in a country which they have been ordained to hate.



Left: Japan's imperialist era (1874-1945)

Right: Japan seizing China (1931-1938)

Reasoning about the more recent history, Japan seems to be more like the Great Britain of Asia, and not China's descendant. Not only the geographical similarity is striking, going into such details as both islands enjoying a warm ocean current which turns them despite their Northern locations into temperate climate zones, but also its historical development in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century bears substantial albeit in the case of Japan delayed resemblance. It is as if nature molded Britain and Japan in one cast; and the Japanese deliberately decided to emulate the industrial and imperialist history of their European idol.

### Japan, the Industrial Frontrunner

My professional career has led me deep into the world of robotics during the last few years and I was therefore exposed to a substantial bit of Japan's industrial might. Four out of six global robot manufacturers, Fanuc, Panasonic, Yaskawa and OTC, are Japanese and some minor manufacturers with quite famous names like Kawasaki, Epson and Naichi usher substantial global activity, in particular in China, where my Japanese business partners told me on various occasions that the battle for the robot market will be decided. Japan though, is currently as a society the most industrialized and commercialized nation on the planet, and I saw the impact of this development everywhere, whether it be the world's largest

industrial robots manufacturing site at Fanuc headquarters, an automated waiter free restaurant or the abundance of small [Lawson](#) and [Family Mart](#) convenient stores, which have destroyed any different form of groceries' trade almost in its entirety.

Japan's struggle with industrialization epitomizes in my eyes at [Fanuc](#). The company was founded in 1958 by the engineer Dr. Seiueemon Inaba, about a decade before the third industrial revolution is commonly assumed to have started and focuses its business activity exactly on the two core technologies of that revolution: robotics and IT. Fanuc is short for Fuji Automated Numerical Control, indicating all you need to know. Headquartered of all locations you can think of in the Mount Fuji National Park at the very foot of Japan's holiest mountain, Fanuc started out with manufacturing control systems as part of the conglomerate [Fujitsu](#), now the world's 4<sup>th</sup> largest IT service provider. After its spin out, the company was at the very center of Japan's economic miracle enabling many well-known consumer brands like Panasonic or Toshiba to manufacture with ever decreasing human employment at ever increasing speed and efficiency. The trademark yellow industrial robots are currently considered to be the industry's state of the art technology. Fanuc's consistent high quality products are said to be the consequence of operating only one manufacturing plant which is subject to a most rigid supply chain control and quality inspection. I consider two aspects about Fanuc worthwhile mentioning: it generates a revenue of more than 6 billion USD with only a bit more than 5000 employees [that's a whooping revenue/employee ratio] and is literally an autonomous manufacturing unit, i.e. using its own product to manufacture the products it sells. The entire facility is staffed out with yellow Fanuc robots picking, placing, welding and assembling the robots which are shipped to Fanuc's global sales network, providing the company first hand user feedback in its own premises. I know a few manufacturing and research executives who would sacrifice a finger for having such short feedback loops to improve their products. But above all, I am in awe and terror about the measure of power which rests in the hands and wallets of the Inaba family and Fanuc's extended clan of shareholders. A faint taste of what is sure to come with the merger of robotics technology and artificial intelligence.

But what are the social implications of such a machinery might? A country which enjoys such a high degree of industrialization is in the grip of Belphegor, the demon of sloth and continuously ranks amongst the top 3 countries in the [WHO suicide statistics](#). Japanese are naturally industrious people being conditioned by Confucian virtues, but a society which deprives man of being engaged in manual work or work in general, makes it difficult to remain productive and give life a purpose but consumption. A stroll through the icon department store [Loft](#) reveals a sheer endless choice of useless products, and one might ask like myself "What for?" or "Who buys that crap?" Supermarkets shock despite the cleanliness of Japanese cities with compared to Europe useless and neurotic extra packaging; every biscuit, every single candy wrapped in wasteful plastic.

Japan's industrial countermovement is though vibrant and visible through small craft shops, which mushroom everywhere. Bike builders, shoe makers, flower arrangers and artisan carpenters are a proof that many young Japanese have turned their attention to craftsmanship despite the high degree of automation. I found this movement quite refreshing and was amazed by the quality of workshops seen. Andy Couturier describes in *The Abundance of Less*, how a few Japanese, who reject the industrialization of their society, have chosen to live in the mountainous countryside, where they do not partake in the consumer society. The conscious choice to be productive despite a collective consumptive conditioning is what I find most remarkable about his case studies. But not everyone is built to be deprived of the amenities which city infrastructure provides. Its therefore equally promising that there are seemingly more and more Japanese who try to combine an urban lifestyle with craftsmanship and hopefully reduced consumerism.

### Japanese Incremental Innovation Rocks

It seems to me that Japanese are after all incremental innovators who are at their best when they improve existing basic innovations. We saw so many examples in the streets like umbrella holders on bikes or ultra comfy e-bikes with front and back children seats; not believing that these small improvements amongst many others have not travelled yet to Europe or China. If I had to set up my own research team, I would try to get a complimentary mix of Western type researchers who have the spirit of pathbreakers and Eastern type engineers who are capable of paying attention to detail, improving any product they set their eyes on. These are stereotypes, I know, but the Japanese strength of incremental innovation is in my opinion also a reason for Japan's current disorientation. All Western innovation seems to have been absorbed and refined. Japan has thus turned into the world's second largest economy and for another good while it will be the world's number three. But a society, so advanced and wealthy, which has turned into an Asian Switzerland as Pilling puts it, needs to move its focus towards pathbreaking fundamental innovation, of technological, economic and social nature; and above all, I believe, that the Japanese on an individual level as well as on a collective one, need to redefine their [ikigai](#), i.e. their purpose, which is in my opinion not anymore solely related to the wellbeing of its own society, but Japanese, Japanese enterprises and the Japanese nation need to ask themselves, what can be contributed to the global community. There is much that can be learned from Japan; there is much what a [sakoku](#) nation can learn from the ROW; this is also true for aspiring *sakoku* nations like China.

### Listening in Manchukuo

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Before traveling to Japan that summer, we made a detour to Heilongjiang province, where my wife hails from. I joked that we first visit the former Japanese colony [Manchukuo](#) before we actually go to Japan. That goes not down well with Dongbei folks, I tell you. Upon taking the train from Daqing to Harbin, passing through the wide and fertile plains covered with forests of oil rigs I realized how wealthy this region is, respectively was, in natural resources. Fossil fuel, timber, fertile soil, water in abundance and lots and lots of open topographically plain and arable land. My wife quite plainly replied that the Japanese were not stupid, they took not only the easiest accessible but also one of the richest part of China.



Noon: Rest from Work (Vincent Van Gogh, 1890)

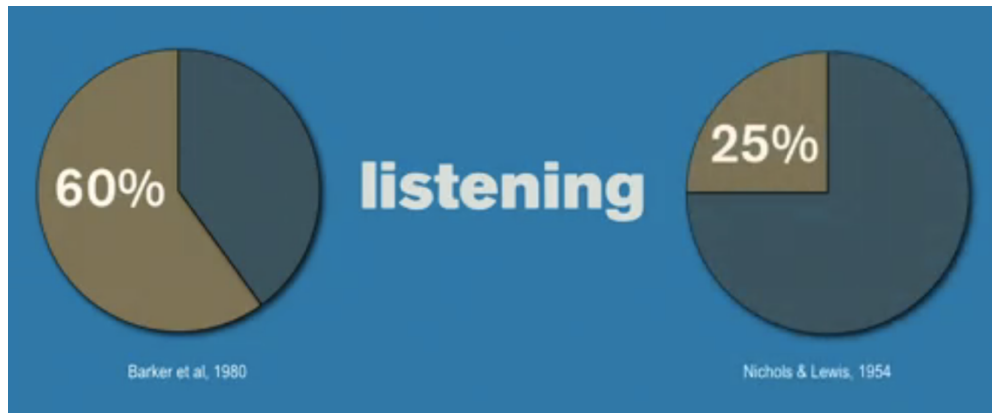
Interestingly, she did also criticize the industry of her Dongbei countrymen, 'who have made nothing out of that natural wealth, because they are lazy compared to Southern Chinese.' The social psychologist [Thomas Talhelm](#) explains the difference between Northern and Southern Chinese cogently with the Rice Theory of Culture: the labor intensity of rice forced agricultural societies to collaborate closely and be more industrious than societies which grow wheat. It kind of seems obvious that patterns of behavior are established by the crops societies predominantly cultivate over many generations. My wife's family are therefore a bunch of wheat idlers; and the rice theory of culture is a lucid example of how social conditioning appears to be genetic inheritance, how constructivism and determinism melt, no matter which side of the argument we choose.

We meet with Gao Tanmei for dinner in Harbin, where she teaches English to secondary students since many years, and discuss her plans of setting up an after school day care center. Her drill teaching method seems to be successful, because she has been listed as top ranking English instructor according to her student's university admission test scores for several years in a row. She tells us that Heilongjiang province has abandoned listening comprehension since two years from its university entrance examinations and jokes, 'that's what you get when you assign somebody who was in charge of pig farming to the task of educating children.' I am hooked and learn that Tai Deliang did implement the listening comprehension ban. His 2014 promotion to the top of the Heilongjiang Education Bureau stirred considerable commotion on weibo, since he headed the Heilongjiang Husbandry and Veterinary Bureau till then. [Nanfang Metropolis Daily](#) comments flatly that his competence gap seems to be to big.



[Sir Ken Robinson](#) explains cogently that the industrial education system, which conceives children as assembly line products to be molded after a government's strategic goals, has an early expiry date, because it ignores the potential of tapping into the individuality of each student. But as we know all too well, empowering the individual is often perceived as weakening the ruling elite. It is understandable that China is in its social development not yet there, where societies which have already experienced 250 years of industrial revolution hover. But we know that things move on a completely different time track in the Middle Kingdom and many Chinese parents are fully aware that the domestic education model does not serve the interest of their offspring. Hundreds if not thousands of hybrid curricula have mushroomed over the last decade enabling Chinese kids to study abroad while attending secondary education at home. An October 2016 [internal document of the Shanghai Education Bureau](#) discusses plans of banning these hybrid curricula to reestablish the government's education monopoly for compulsory schooling.

The sound consultant Julian Treasure explains in a [classic TED](#) talk that we spend roughly 60% of our time listening and only 25% speaking. He shows that listening is our species' way to understanding, and that we, and by that he most likely addresses the Western world, are losing this skill, because the art of conversation is being replaced by personal broadcasting. Listening, so Treasure recommends, ought to be taught in schools.



I wonder what the Dalai Lama would tell the Chinese, if he were allowed to visit the country. He most likely wouldn't recommend to learn English, because the Chinese speak much better English than the Japanese. But he would probably emphasize the competence of listening, which our species loses in general due to our gradual decent into the virtual world. A loss which is aggravated for the individual by national sakoku policies. What a global and connected world needs though are good listeners and international team players; not scientists and engineers whose employers find suffice in their foreign patent database and scientific journal reading skills.

### Silence on Kumano Kodo



If one has seen Scorsese's 1988 movie [The Last Temptation of Jesus Christ](#), one wonders why a seasoned director like him hasn't moved on. It is said that he wanted to make a movie about Jesus' life since his childhood; the result of that wish was a cinematic masterpiece which shows William Dafoe as God's mentally deranged son. Silence reflects that one movie on Christianity was not enough for an American of catholic Italian heritage and makes me ask how an educated man can be so obsessed with a religion for all of his hitherto 74-year long life?

The reason I wanted to see Silence is my own recently found interest in Japan and the tension between the land where the sun rises, i.e. the very far end of the orient, and my own occidental cultural heritage. Although we are intrigued by Scorsese's directing skills, which remind in this work of [Bernardo Bertolucci's](#) style of crafting stunning visual art, the movie disappoints in contents, and leaves the audience with a lukewarm feeling of having spent almost three hours watching a meditation on the meaning of silence without being able to arrive at a tangible conclusion. 15' sitting in silent meditation staring at a white wall would have probably brought more enlightenment.

We know that silence has great value and there are plenty of smart people who have used less time to make a point thereon; like Japan based writer Pico Iyer who gave in 2014 a TED talk about [the art of stillness](#). I have even made a related Chinese proverb my motto: 回头是岸 | look inwards for salvation. But I would have expected the movie more to deal with the dualist worldview of Christianity and the monist outlook of Shintoism. Scorsese sadly fails to elaborate thereon, although I feel that he wanted to. It seems as if he did not understand the underlying psychological phenomenon himself. Lines like these confirm my assumption: *The price for your glory is their suffering. [...] We believe to have brought you the truth. Its universal. [...] Every tree that flourishes in one kind of soil can decay in another.*

We have talked earlier about anthropology professor Alan Macfarlane's finding that Japan never went through a separation of sacred and the profane and is thus probably the most monistic society which can be encountered on this planet. All the uniqueness which might be perceived from the one or other Western perspective is a consequence of this condition. A discriminating social order in the 17<sup>th</sup> century might have been a fertile soil for Christianity, but Scorsese does not focus on why Japanese fall for the Western religion; his movie is all about the inner dialogue of a Jesuit priest, who struggles with his faith and the related communication strategy, i.e. how he practices his faith in public through prayer, service, baptism, confessions and above all his missionary fervor.

		Contents	
		General Contents	Specific Contents
		Basis Semantics	
		theistic	pantheistic
Core Dimensions	intellect	interest in religious questions	religious reflexion, search for religious menaing, search for meaning in life, theozidee question
		religious socialization	
	ideology (faith)	plausibility of transcendence	image of God, theozidee concept, religious pluralism, religious fundamentalism
	public practice	attendance of holy service, community prayers, spiritual practice	interreligious practice, religious network
		religious socialization	
	private practice	Prayer	Meditation
		religious socialization	religious coping style (looking inwards for salvation, asking for forgiveness, etc)
Centrality	experience	you - experience	all - experience
		religious socialization	religious feelings (guilt, submission, fear, safety, etc)
	consequences	general relevance of religion in daily life	relevance of religion in several aspects of life
		Centrality Scale (Z-scale)	
		religious socialization	religious & spiritual self-concept
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We see a young man who believes in the Christian doctrine of love as path towards salvation and follows his mission to preach the Lord's gospel to those in need like a prophet. His religion's semantic is theistic; he engages in daily and frequent prayer, i.e. a dialogue with God and thus experiences his relationship with the creator on a personal level. He believes in a world which is separated between those who believe in his truthful Lord and those who don't and thus measures not only heaven against hell, but also them against us.

His Japanese host society though is a culture which is based on a pantheistic semantic, which does not differentiate between good and evil, between heaven and hell, where no personal relationship can be established with God; God is nature and thus can be experienced in relation to all sentient and non sentient beings. The Jesuit believes in a transcendental hierarchy of all children being the same before the Lord, as opposed to the Japanese aristocracy which perceives his teachings naturally as sabotaging the society's existing power structures and thus forces him to shut up. Surrounded by an external world which does not permit him anymore to practice his faith in public, a society which punishes those he tries to salvage with death, he is forced to apostatize in public, but remains deeply faithful within.

The resulting silence in his outer world, the forced change of his communication strategy in regard to his faith, is used by Scorsese to reveal the essence of a widely accepted misunderstanding in the Western world: that the constant stream of thoughts in our minds, our prayers to and conversations with God are more than a subjective reality. Scorsese's deep catholic conditioning gets overwhelming towards the end of the movie as we watch the Jesuit priest being cremated in a traditional Japanese ceremony, but holding even then tightly to a small crucifix; let's spare us a discussion of these scenes and conclude that they fall within the scope of a director's artistic freedom.

Leaving 17<sup>th</sup> century Japan, I would like to continue the ontological discussion on the nature of silence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Historian Harari quotes in his latest book *Homo Deus* the New Scientist's journalist Sally Adee, who was allowed to visit a training facility for snipers and test the effects of transcranial direct current stimulators, i.e. helmet-like devices which change man's subjective experience and objective mental capabilities through electric stimulation. *The experiment changed Sally's life. In the following days she realized that she has been through a 'near-spiritual experience ... what defined the experience was not feeling smarter or learning faster: the thing that made the earth drop out from under my feet was that for the first time in my life everything in my head finally shut up ... my brain without self-doubt was a revelation. There was suddenly this incredible silence in my head ...*

The relevance of Scorsese's movie is therefore not in relation to a religious confession. The ruminations which many experience in regard to their faith have as a matter of fact turned into an epidemic which does not differentiate between devotees and infidels; fanatics and pagans; extremists and moderates or atheist scientists and sincere believers. Only the mind of intuitive sages is spared from an epidemic from which humanity suffers at large: a stream of consciousness which never shuts down, never shuts up, is never shut off. The deeper message of the movie is therefore, at least in my own bullet train of thoughts, that silence teaches and helps us to grow.

The artistic realization of these interesting concepts is in a word mediocre, but one is intrigued to follow up in real life and try silence not as an oppressed external conditions, but as a deliberate choice and an internal state of mind, e.g. by hiking a few days on the Kumano Kodo in the South of Japan's Wakayama peninsula. It is there that we experience the overlap between Shintoism and Christianity, because both, the old path of the wild bear to Hongu and the Camino de Santiago de Compostela lead us through silence closer to our true self. Peregrinators in Spain and Japan learn there that spirituality is a fire from within; religion – whether anthropocentric or theocentric – though a fire from without, which in the worst case burns you at the stake.

### What to do

Japan is the most European country of all Asian travel destinations and I find myself quite often reminded of Central or Western Europe with few high rises, a large number of detached one or two story houses and a superb infrastructure of roads and railways. More than 90% urbanization rate contribute to the feeling that the countryside is literally deserted. Japan is therefore the ideal destination to get away from Shanghai's crowds or to combine a weekend in Japanese urban centers like Osaka | 大阪 or Tokyo | 东京 with a few days in Nippon's lush green nature, where gorgeous hiking and typical hot springs | onsen treat Mordor's residents to much needed serenity.

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A weekend in Japan's capital will go down well with hikes in the Mount Fuji | 富士山 area, in particular around the small cities of Hakone | 箱根 or Kamakura | 鎌倉. A similar experience is possible in busy Osaka | 大阪 and hiking on the Wakayama peninsula, where ancient pilgrimage routes called Kumano Kodo | 熊野古道 lead from several directions to the Kumano Hongu Taisha Grand Shrine. Peregrinates have travelled these trails for more than 1000 years and modern hikers are blessed with a mixture of unspoiled nature and Shinto-Buddhist cultural heritage. The area around Hongu | 本宮 offers easy day walks and strenuous multiday hikes; detailed maps are available online and FOC in the local tourism offices. Two Kumano Kodo routes are particularly recommendable: the Nakahechi which can be done in both directions from the coastal city of Tanabe | 田辺 crossing over the peninsula to the coastal city of Shingu | 新宮; and the Kohechi, which usually starts in the temple complex of Koyasan | 高野山 and winds its way South to Hongu | 本宮.

If you are not interested in Japanese modern metrópolis flair, then go from Osaka airport directly to Kyoto | 京都 or Nara | 奈良, two smaller cities with rich history and many sights which can serve as a nice backdrop to get information about the country's past and its relation to China. Nara was the first capital of the Japanese Empire which was established in 710 AD and is with eight Unesco World Heritage Sites only second to Kyoto as a repository of Japan's cultural legacy. The 370k people city is easy to navigate and feels compared to Shanghai like a village, but boasts all the comfort of a city and the cultural value of a metrópolis. In fact, Nara itself is surrounded by undulating hills and many well marked trails start directly from Nara Park into the countryside.

Chinese tourists nowadays travel to Kyoto and Nara to admire Tang dynasty architecture and refined Chinese garden landscaping; and like I said earlier it's a joy to see them realizing the shared cultural history. The somewhat conflict laden contemporary relationship between China and Japan can be understood when we look back a few centuries. Japan imported from its long term dominant but 20<sup>th</sup> century dormant neighbor not only the language - linguistically speaking very similar to what happened in the transformation of continental Old High German on the British islands - but almost all of its present day culture. Japan imported Chinese Chan Buddhism and made Zen out of it; it imported Daoism and created Shintoism; it imported Confucianism and built its local version of Neo-Confucianism. If you would strip Japan of its Chinese heritage, not much would be left, but what it imported starting with the Meiji Period in 1868 from Europe. Japan seems to be in this regard as a nation a genuine copy cat and it seems that its above described incremental innovation prowess is a result of this general mentality to absorb and adapt faster than other societies.

Japanese like to compare themselves often with the Galapagos: a distinct place in evolution; yet another aspect of above mentioned Nihonjinron, which causes me to notice parallels to the Jewish self-understanding of being the God chosen people, in particular because Nihonjinron *builds on the phoney concept of a racially homogenous society*. In both cases this self-understanding created a successful myth, but simultaneously brought disaster upon its adherents. In the case of Japan it might well be that the recent catastrophe in the nuclear power plant in Fukushima and the devastating tsunami are signals for a society to open up to the world. Its also worth noting that China seems to have had ever since a sense of cultural superiority, most vividly expressed in [sinocentrism](#), but emulates in recent years increasingly Japanese exceptionalism based on a national identity which thrives on an equally phoney concept of a homogenous society.

When Japan turned in the late 19th century its back on the ailing Chinese Empire to which it had sent as vassal state for many centuries tributes, it deeply offended the self-understood superiority of its cultural mother. But not only that, Japan turned into an imperialist regional power and started in the 20<sup>th</sup> century a brutal colonization of the Asian continent in the model of 19<sup>th</sup> century European imperialists in Africa and sliced China with other intruders into digestible pieces. Without the US engagement in the Asian hot beds of WWII, it is very likely that China would be today a Japanese colony; much like the US was England's dependency for a considerable stretch of time.

American sociologist Barrington Moore showed in [Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy](#) that regional developments follow certain sociological patterns which seem to bear a global truth; cultural differences don't change the overall course of how societies progress, but rather how land ownership is regulated and thus how elites interact with the proletariat. China and Japan suffer in this regard from the same disease, which was respectively is a boon during both societies' industrialization: the strict hierarchical structure of Confucianism, which fails to transcend the family concept beyond the national bond in the era of post-modernity. An increasingly globalized world will probably continue to require certain hierarchies, but above all it has to enter a meritocracy based from of interaction and organization. From such a point of view, individuals, communities, nations or even civilizations are only entitled to lead if they contribute to the wellbeing of humanity at large.

### Where to stay

Cities like Tokyo, Osaka or Kyoto offer accommodation for every taste and budget, but countryside lodging provides usually two additional options: ryokan and minshuku. Ryokan are boutique hotels with private onsen, whereas minshuku are private B&Bs which often include delicious local cuisine. Nara has a number of old wooden guesthouses in the

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Naramachi district, which are good value and give an authentic feeling of Japanese traditional housing. When hiking along the Kumano Kodo basic minshuku accommodation without boarding can be found starting at JPY 4000; small supermarkets in villages along the route give opportunity to stock up on food and drinks. After multiday hikes it is recommended to stay in minshukus which are close to a public onsen like in Kawayu, Yunomine or Wataze, where swimming in crystal cold mountain creeks is turned into an uncomparably blissful experience by soaking until late evening in nearby hot springs.

### How to get there

The return air fare from Shanghai (PVG) to Osaka (KIX) starts usually at about CNY 1600; but recently [Peach Airlines](#), a Japanese low cost carrier makes direct return flights from Pudong to Osaka and Tokyo available for as low as CNY 1000. Be prepared to fly in the dark of the night and have a rough first day in Japan with little sleep the night before.

Take either a cab or travel environmentally friendly with the airport shuttle bus from [Jingan Aviation Building | 静安寺航站楼](#) to Pudong Airport | 浦东机场. Buses run from 5:30 to 21:30 every 15-30' and cost only CNY 22. After a 45-60' ride make sure to get off at the right terminal; T2 is usually your destination for international flights. More information about airport bus lines is available on the [Airport website](#).

### Further travel information

- <http://www.tb-kumano.jp/en/kumano-kodo/>
- <http://www.kansai-airport.or.jp/en/index.asp>
- [www.hakone.or.jp/en](http://www.hakone.or.jp/en)
- [www.city.kamakura.kanagawa.jp/english](http://www.city.kamakura.kanagawa.jp/english)

### Further reading

- [Bending Adversity: Japan and the Art of Survival](#) by David Pilling
- [The Abundance of Less: Lessons in Simple Living from Rural Japan](#) by Andy Courturier
- [Zen in the Art of Archery](#) by Eugen Herrigel
- [Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy](#) – Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World by Barrington Moore
- [Japan Through the Looking Glass](#) by Alan MacFarlane