

Reflections on Japan

Anna Sheu

Bonding Over Shoujo (Girly) Anime. Seriously.

Shoujo anime—it's a girl thing. Hormone-crazed females squealing over male idols, catfights, wild emotion swings: all exclusive *shoujo* repertoire. *Shounen* (guy) anime has none of that. According to my travel partner Joel, *shounen* anime is all about the action. Swashbuckling sword fights and the like.

I have never been a tomboy, so naturally I chose to watch *shoujo* anime. Japanese animation, which is anime's root word, was a mysterious world that I wanted to experience. And so, when Host Mother turned on the TV and asked what I wanted to watch, I happily declared, "Anime!"

Host Mother couldn't find age-appropriate anime; most of it was for kindergarten and grade-school children. So she took me to the local rental store, which had, according to her, insanelly low prices. What greeted me at that store were miles and miles of DVDs, with titles I had to sound out syllable by syllable.

Well, syllable-by-syllable got tedious, so I judged a DVD by its cover and picked the one that looked most appealing. The title I selected was humorous as well as artistically outstanding (in my opinion). It was called Skip Beat.

That night, the two of us eagerly pried open the case. The show's protagonist, a hilariously revenge-driven actress named Kyouko, made us guffaw past midnight. It was 1am when we finally finished the first DVD and went to sleep. The next night Host Mother and I ate dinner in front of the TV, engrossed by Kyouko's antics. Host Mother confessed that she had never really watched anime either. It was a new experience for both of us.

Hooked by our eternally conniving actress, we routinely stayed up until 1 o'clock, 2 o'clock to watch Skip Beat. And the two of us, Host Mother and I, got closer. It seemed we had the same sense of humor—we laughed at the same things, while Joel (who deemed it typical *shoujo* fare after seeing the comical expressions) gamely watched beside us. Host Mother and I even jested about Skip Beat during the daytime. And once the inside jokes come out, you know you're friends.

Who would have thought an ambitious actress—cartoon, no less—could have given us two some of the best laughs of our life?

We Might Think They're Ninjas. Now Here's What They Think of Us.

"So, do you have four seasons in America?"

This question, posed to me in Japanese by Host Mother, is one of the often-cited "foreign stereotypes" Japanese people have. Though today's globalized society has almost eradicated cultural unawareness, some vestiges remain. So as an overseas ambassador, I made it my unofficial mission to break down the walls of misunderstanding. Anna Sheu, Mythbuster. Yup, that's me.

Back to the climate question. Japan does indeed have well-defined seasons: mild springs, complete with blooming *sakura*; hot and sunny summers; temperate autumns, with the requisite red foliage; and cold winters, snow and all. Some Japanese think that seasons are a phenomenon exclusive to their country.

Unfortunately, I did not get to share my knowledge of the Earth's diversity and enlighten a friend, because (as the Japanese "suspect") San Francisco is a ワンシゾン ("one season," Japanese-ified) place: perennially foggy and 60 degrees Fahrenheit. But I did mention that New York has much the same climate as Japan. Stereotypes: 1, Me: 0.

Later, as we lugged my bags upstairs, Host Mother hesitatingly told me that I'd be sleeping on the floor and apologized. Host Mother's room was the same, but foreigners couldn't sleep on *tatami*. Or could they? I was initially worried about the straw *tatami*, but figured it was softer than marble tile, which is what we have at my house. Then I realized "sleep on the floor" meant not "sleep on the *tatami*," but rather "sleep on the *futon* on the *tatami*." In Japan, a *futon* is not a couch but rather a sort of mattress pad. As a typical sleep-deprived teenager, any kind of soft cushion has soporific effects on me, and so I was a-okay with "sleeping on the floor." Host Mother let out a relieved sigh. Me, 1, Stereotypes, 1. Good, good; catching up.

Soon another pesky assumption popped up. During dinner (a delicious ramen stir-fry), Host Mother looked quizzically at the untouched chopsticks beside me, while I furiously scooped up noodles with my fork. Foreigners aren't traditionally known for their chopstick prowess. "*Dekinai no?*" she said. Errrr...kind of, if using chopsticks as primitive forks by stabbing them into food counts as "using" chopsticks. I told her that both my parents and younger sister as well could use chopsticks. Clearly, I had the chopstick gene. It was just a recessive gene. Two-to-one, Stereotypes versus Me. Uh-oh.

One might think I was quickly becoming the classic tourist by now, but I was not defeated yet. In all our exchanges, Host Mother and I spoke Japanese. I bumbled, fumbled, and stumbled my way through conversations, but I only used *Nihongo*. Throughout my three-week homestay, acquaintances often expressed their utter shock that an *Amerika-jin* (me) was able to speak something other than English. In America, it's not surprising to meet people who are multilingual (probably because of the US' sizeable immigrant population and foreign-language school programs, which are relatively common) but in Japan, which has a largely homogeneous population, the only widespread foreign language (if any) is English. I was happy to demonstrate my high school training. There goes the "Americans only speak English" perception. Me: 2, Stereotypes: 2. Hmm, tie.

Towards the end of my stay, a most frightening stereotype reared its head. Like a videogame's "final boss," it was the hardest to shatter. I was generously invited to partake in a traditional tea ceremony, with all the trimmings—kimono, tearoom, graceful hostess and all. Decked out in an elegant cotton *yukata*, I was blissfully looking forward to a lovely *sadou*, when my hostess graciously offered me a chair instead of asking me to sit *seiza* style. I pounced on the chance to show that I was not the average American. Declining the Western-style seat, I told Hostess-san that I had "*seiza* experience". That was not a lie; I had in fact sat *seiza* before, but probably for only five, ten minutes at most. As the ceremony, which is slowly and deliberately performed (emphasis on slowly), plodded on, my feet started to tingle. Then my ankles. My calves soon followed. I desperately wished for my turn to stand up and receive the tea. However, when I finally stood up, I nearly keeled over, thanks to my numb appendages. Returning to *seiza* position was even more torturous, and so I bashfully accepted the stool. I call it a draw. Stereotypes, 3; Me, 3.

But wait! My last type-busting act was to give a gift to the Osakan mayor's representative, and I delivered the package with a sentence of ultra-polite Japanese: "*Honno oshirushi de gozaimasu ga.*" And a box of flawless peaches to the department head of International House: "*Tsumaranai mono de gozaimasu ga.*" American girl shows she knows Japanese etiquette: thank you Takamatsu-*sensei* and Wikipedia for those cultural lessons! Final score: 4-3, Me versus Stereotypes.

Not bad. It was a pretty successful trip for this Mythbuster.

Not Your Momma's *Kaiten*

Imagine a line of army-neat plates, slowly and deliberately circling while delicately carrying nuggets of delicacies. Indeed, this is the famous *kaitenzushi*, or “conveyor-belt sushi.” But wait! This is not your typical hole-in-the-wall. Oh no. This is a colossal affair with parking garage. This is real *kaitenzushi*.

One midsummer night, Host Mother wondered what to do for dinner. “*Doko ni iku ka naa,*” she mused. Grandson Daiichi-kun piped up: “*Sushi!*” So sushi it was; light and refreshing, the perfect companion for that humid dusky evening. Host Mother inquired whether I’d experienced *kaitenzushi* before. Yeah, *koto ga aru*; nothing terribly amazing, if you ask me.

I call the restaurant 寿司 because it had a large 「寿司」 (“sushi”) written on the side. And you ain’t eaten *kaiten* until you’ve eaten here.

I started to realize that this wasn’t just any sushi bar when we approached the mammoth building. It was bigger than most restaurant I’d been to, sushi or otherwise. Then we went in, and my memories of American sushi experience shriveled up and died.

The *kaitenzushi* restaurants I’d been to had only one loop of sushi in the center of the room, around which the patrons sat. 寿司 had aisles of diner-style booths (plump cushioned benches) and the loop was more like a snake winding through the aisles. Five or six aisles.

The layout was just the beginning. Unlike most American *kaitenzushi*, this restaurant was computerized. That’s right, touchscreen-computer-computerized. Each booth had a mini interface that could order sushi, for those who didn’t want to wait for 3425 other plates to pass (or preferred “fresher” pieces). This clairvoyant screen would beep when the specially-ordered sushi, atop a chili-red platform that said ご注文, approached the table. Each table—yes, table—had a slot where one dropped the finished plates; somehow the slot would also keep a tally of the bill as the plates mysteriously disappeared into the darkness. As if a sentient slot and a mini computer weren’t impressive enough (did I mention the computer games on the touchscreen), 寿司 had installed hot water taps to the side of each booth—fresh tea on demand! And the pièce de résistance: each plate had a barcode on the bottom, scanned at a specific checkpoint. If the sushi was past its prime—clang! clack! the plate fell through a trapdoor of which the barcode was the magic key. Bay Area *kaitenzushi* do not have RFID-equipped conveyors, and the issue of freshness is probably “buyer beware.” 寿司’s mind-boggling amenities made my Bay Area sushi experience akin to roasting meat over a fire in a cave.

Whiz-bang gizmos aside, 寿司 also offered a dazzling array of exotic edibles. First, the sushi: Korean kalbi *nigiri*, hanbagaa *gunkanmaki*, *takoyaki* soup, *warabi mochi*. All not traditionally found in sushi restaurants (or *anywhere*). Then—juice! Soda! Beer, even! And ice cream! Specially-designed containers kept these miscellaneous goodies chilled. 寿司 took *kaiten* to the extreme—the conveyor brought not only sushi, but also drinks and dessert. To me, 寿司 was the Mecca of fast-food sushi, the ne plus ultra of *kaitenzushi*, the zenith of chain-store restaurants.

I staggered out after a whirlwind seventeen plates, with my stomach full, soul enriched, and a story to bring home.