

Singing in the Rain

Benjamin Fouassier

I stayed in Japan just 2 months, which was not really long enough to get a fair impression of a country, so I will just try to share my impressions of what especially attracted my attention as a newcomer.

In comparison to Tokyo, I know Paris quite well because I studied for 2 years at the Lycée Janson-de-Sailly and I rode the Parisian métro and RER many times during the rush hour. But my Parisian experience cannot be compared with the daily congestion in Tokyo. For example, taking a train on the Yamanote Line in the busy morning hours is both an impressive and fearsome experience. At Ikebukuro Station around 0830, a feeling of anxiety takes hold when you first see the endless but orderly queues of passengers ready to surge into the cars. It is difficult to believe that so many people can get into such a limited space, but smiling railway employees are on hand to pack the last few people in. If you don't know the strategic spots, you can quickly find

yourself in a very tight position with no room and no strap to hang on. In such a case, a sudden train start or stop can precipitate a falling mass of people—obviously something to avoid.

Fortunately, the trains are not always so crowded and I think they are a good place to get an idea about the latest trends. Beyond any doubt, I was immediately surprised by the huge popularity of *keitai* portable phones. If you want to make some easy money in Japan, bet that a portable phone will ring somewhere near you in the next 2 minutes—you are bound to win. This is especially noticeable in trains where every journey is punctuated by phones programmed to ring with the melodies of popular tunes. But I wonder what all these people with a phone stuck to their ear have to say to each other. It also seems that there is a craze for an extensive range of ornamental accessories for portables—'Hello Kitty' pendants, bells, antennas that light up—there are

plenty to choose from. These adornments can be seen poking out of every pocket and handbag and are sometimes more bulky and cumbersome than the phone itself. Sometimes, I wonder if the primary function of a portable phone is just to support all these gadgets. Many of these accessorized phones are carried by younger Japanese women who often remain very immature for a long time.

What can I say about these super-tanned girls, blond highlights in their hair and heavy glitter eye makeup, who like to sport garish and pastel colors? Generally, they wear shoes with soles so thick that they can't walk naturally; perched on these huge platforms, they struggle to move without stumbling. The effect of this attempt at individuality is that they finally all look self-defeatingly alike, as if the outfit is just another uniform.

To my great regret, I arrived in Tokyo after the cherry blossoms. But I did manage to enjoy the June rainy season. For a



Ikebukuro rush hour

(EJRCF)

Frenchman, it is quite a new experience to get rain virtually everyday for a month, but oddly enough, I didn't find this warm rain depressing. Instead, it gave Tokyo a new face. Unlike sullen and cold French rainy days, the Japanese rainy season is synonymous with humidity and heat, giving it a certain exotic attraction to a north European. Perhaps I am a romantic, but I remember going home after a late evening out with friends, and being greeted by warm driving rain as I left the train station. What pleasure to walk quietly home past people huddled under umbrellas, soaking wet but happy and humming a French love song.

As a visiting intern, my experience of company dormitory life *à la Japonaise* was also interesting, especially because I live in a student residence in France. In my student residence, men and women live on the same floor and sometimes even share an apartment. But in Japanese dormitories, the sexes are much more separate—men in one wing, women in the other, and both strongly advised against venturing to the opposite side. Of course, this doesn't mean that there is no contact between opposite-sex colleagues.

My student residence in France is so noisy until late at night that I was stunned by the quietness of my dormitory in Japan. No noise and silent empty passages made it difficult to believe that there were any occupants. The cafeteria where most residents eat alone, glancing from time to time at the television set, was silent too. But despite the quietness, the atmosphere was still what I would call 'friendly', with older residents taking younger ones under their wing, and occasionally sharing a beer or *sake* at a local *nomiya* (hole-in-the-wall bar).

On weekends, when I wanted to mingle with Japanese crowds, I went to department stores where an unending stream of young and old people bustle about looking for the latest fashions. Although the Japanese economy is



Accessorized portable phone (M. Inoue)



Tanned Twins (Popteen Monthly—K. Murakami)

currently in recession with declining consumer spending, the only evidence of problems was the many discount sales. Generally, these temples to consumption have many floors and a large proportion are dedicated to clothing for women, who are the main targets of advertising campaigns. Sometimes, it is not even necessary to leave the train station to visit the stores because they are located in the station buildings. Another very convenient feature of these stores (and one never found in France) is the restaurants on the upper floors. Just imagine being able to shop from morning to night without even leaving the train station!

Another part of the cityscape are the ubiquitous drinks vending machines—in stations, in offices, and everywhere on the

street. They sell a huge selection of drinks ranging from beer and whisky to small bottles of energy drinks with vitamins and herbal extracts that are very popular. Some cost just 120 yen but others are very expensive. Always in search of new sensations and curious about the power of these potions, I tried one of the less potent types one day when I was feeling weak. Although I was slightly disappointed not to be transformed into a Japanese *manga* (comic book) superhero, I really felt a surge of energy a few minutes later.

There are many other vivid impressions and fond memories of my stay that I would have liked to mention but chief among these are the friendships formed with my Japanese colleagues and that I hope to renew one day when they visit France. ■



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