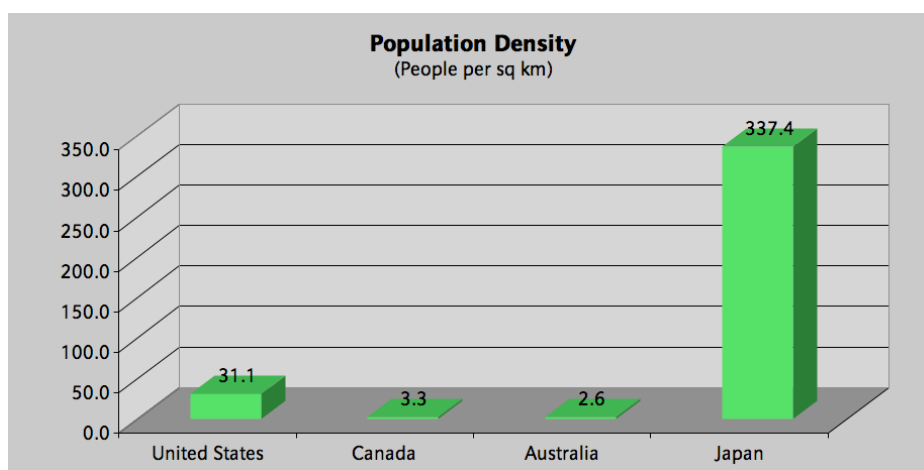


Chapter Twelve - Space and Touching

I. Reading

Wide open spaces

If one looks at a map of the world, it is easy to see that the sizes of countries vary a great deal. Not surprisingly, this size, and more importantly, the population density have a big impact on the cultures of those countries. Japan's land totals about 378,000 square kilometers, much of it mountainous. About 127 million of us are living in that space. That's about 337 people per square kilometer. However, Australia covers 7,687,000 square kilometers, but has just over twenty million people, resulting in a population density of only 2.6 people per square kilometer. The United States has a population density of about 31. Those kinds of differences are bound to make a difference in the society and culture.¹



Never too much space



Some of the differences are predictable, but others aren't. The space around us that we are used to even changes how we see. When Japanese automakers began to export cars in the sixties, the designs seemed very strange to Western eyes; the Japanese designers were concerned with details, but the Westerners stepped back and looked at the overall impression. The details were finely crafted, but to Western eyes, there were too many of them crowded onto too small a surface.

Westerners generally prefer larger, less crowded rooms, and sometimes feel crowded and uncomfortable in rooms that feel "just right" to Japanese. In an apartment I used to live in, an old girlfriend would always close all the 襖 (*fusuma*) when she visited; she said it made wherever we were sitting "more like a room." Well, that tiny room made me feel claustrophobic. I liked all the 襖 (*fusuma*) open (or removed!) to give a feeling of space. I imagine some Japanese might feel this made the apartment seem 寂しい (*sabishii*). I can remember one of the adjustments I had to make in my early years in Japan; as I practiced my photography, I gave up using my telephoto lenses and had to buy an extra wide-angle lens or two. Everything felt too close.

Closed eyes

Because we all live so close to each other here in Japan, we have to learn how to "not see" certain things. You may remember our discussion of 文楽 (*bunraku*) and 建前 (*tatemaie*) in Chapter Seven. In countries where there are relatively few people around, and one's nearest neighbor can be miles away, this skill never gets learned. Learning that one needs to close one's

¹ You can find the sizes, populations, and population densities of various countries on Wikipedia

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_population_density>.

eyes to reality can be a contributing factor to culture shock, which we will discuss in Chapter Fifteen. This includes behaviors like holding one's hand over one's mouth when using a toothpick, or thinking of paper 襖 (*fusuma*) as "walls," or groups of friends out together while each is doing something completely different. Wherever one looks, someone else is doing something that is best not seen, so one needs to learn how to "not see."

Touchie-feelies

These different feelings about space have fascinating consequences in the cultures. Think back to our discussion about greetings in Chapter Seven. It's interesting that it is the Western culture that uses touching in greetings, rather than the Japanese. In Japan, we bow when greeting each other. In the west, we'll shake hands, pat or grab a shoulder, or even hug and kiss if we know the person well. Kissing is also common in parts of Europe and Central and South America. (Of course, there are many rules about when, where, and with whom this is appropriate.)

Things get even more interesting, however. In the west, strangers almost never touch. Any accidental brushing against a stranger requires an immediate apology; failure to apologize after touching a stranger is considered very rude. This is true on the street, in stores, in elevators, and on trains, buses, or planes. In fact, in my hometown, bumping someone is usually considered an attack, or a provocation for a fight. Wherever one is, a distance is always maintained between strangers - except for emergencies, of course. People line up carefully, board buses or trains one at a time, and when it becomes too crowded to allow for that comfortable distance, people stop boarding and wait for the next elevator, train, or bus. To push oneself beyond this point would be very rude. A "full" bus in Chicago holds only about half of the people it could hold in Japan - and it's not entirely because the Chicagoans are fatter (though they probably are)!



Back off



Imagine the confusion of a Westerner from this culture on his first rush hour train ride in Osaka. People bouncing off each other through wickets and on platforms, people cutting in line, pushing and shoving on the train, and strangers with their bodies pressed up against each other. Try to explain to this Westerner why all this touching is OK, but that grabbing the shoulder or patting the back of an acquaintance when meeting will make him feel uncomfortable. Why is it OK to press yourself against a stranger on a train, but not OK to hug an acquaintance when you meet him or her on the street?

One of the points of confusion is the idea of personal space, and what that space means. In Japan, the personal space zone is often decided by context - the *where* and *when*, rather than *who*. This makes sense in a place where space is a luxury. In more spacious countries, there is almost always enough space, and, therefore, different rules apply. People in these cultures can use the space to help them express feelings about relationships - it's *who* that becomes important. As people get to know each other better, they are more comfortable letting the person be physically closer. The personal space zone is smaller when the person is close to you, larger when it's a stranger. Now, think again about that poor Westerner on a Tokyo rush hour train.

II. Comprehension Questions

If you have a difficult time answering these questions, read the passage again. If you can't find the answer, make a note of your question and ask the teacher for an explanation in your next class.

1. What seemed strange about Japanese cars to Americans in the 1960's? Why?
2. What is it about space in Japan that might make Americans and Australians uncomfortable?
3. Why did my Japanese girlfriend and I have problems with my apartment?
4. How might customs of countries with very little space and of countries with a lot of space differ?
5. Try to make five rules about "touching" for a person visiting Japan for the first time.

III. Thinking

New words and expressions

What are the main points in this chapter?

General summary of main points.

List some examples from your own life or observations that support these points:

List some examples from your own life or observations that do not support these points:

Your reactions and opinions: