

Chapter Six - Content and Form

I. Reading

What you see, what you get

In our discussion of 文楽 (*Bunraku*) in Chapter 5, we took a look at different ways cultures deal with differences between reality and what we choose to see. In fact, the importance Japanese culture and society places on appearance—how things look—makes it unique among cultures. This concern for appearance runs so deep in Japanese culture that one can find it almost anywhere, but because it is so pervasive (普及して), we need to pay attention to actually see it.



A good example of the importance given to appearances is the custom of wrapping items such as gifts or department store purchases. From the traditional 風呂敷 (*furoshiki*) to the multi-layered wrapping of department store purchases, to the elaborate wrapping of gifts. While Westerners also usually wrap gifts, they very rarely attach so much importance to what is outside; it's the gift, or the thought of the gift, that counts, not the wrapping. Of course, Japanese think the gift is important, too. Both Japanese and American students want the newest iPhone for their birthdays—but only the Japanese students will be put off if it's given to them in a plastic Apple Store bag.

We saw some examples of the importance of appearance in Chapter Five when we looked at differences in clothes (people wrapping!) and the idea of 立前 (*tatemaie*), but evidence is everywhere. Japanese chefs are as concerned with how their food looks as how it tastes. Every year friends and families exchange beautifully wrapped お歳暮 (*o-seibo*) and お中元 (*o-chuugen*), but often leave the gifts unopened and “recycle” them to other friends or families. Behavior and language changes dramatically, depending whether one is with someone within the group (内, *uchi*) or outside the group (外, *soto*). The very important Japanese concept of “face” (顔を立てる, *kao o tateru*) is a perfect illustration of the concept of form over content.



This is not to say that Westerners are unconcerned with appearances. Quite the contrary. (Especially if one comes from southern California!) It's just that generally, the balance of importance shifts more toward content and away from form when contrasted to Japanese thinking. Various English expressions caution us against trusting appearances:

- Don't judge a book by its cover.
- Still waters run deep.
- Things are not always what they seem.
- A wolf in sheep's clothing.

To echo an idea from Chapter Five, Westerners are eager to get to the “real” stuff under the shell of appearance; Japanese are more willing to appreciate the aesthetics of the wrapping and

leave the content for a later time, and maybe preserve some harmony in the bargain.

The world is a stage

The business suit is not the only formal “people wrapping” important in Japan. Though this aspect of culture has been changing rapidly since the late 1990’s, Japanese culture still relies heavily on clothing to help express and identify a person’s role; Western culture has been using clothing more for the purpose of individual expression. Until recently in Japan, only university students enjoyed the freedom for this kind of expression, and that, ironically, became its own role identifier.

If you were to visit a shopping mall in the U.S., one of the things you would notice is that the clothes people were wearing has less to do with a person’s age, occupation, or social role than you would expect. You’d see people in their sixties and seventies wearing jeans and sneakers, for example, and mothers and daughters wearing the same styles. They choose their clothes based on their individual personalities rather than the role they play in society.

Until very recently in Japan, people’s roles in society were very clearly expressed by the clothes they wore. Young businessmen dressed like young businessmen, grandmothers dressed like grandmothers, “young mommies” dressed like “young mommies,” high school, junior high school, and elementary students wore school uniforms, and if someone were wearing something really unusual, well, that would be a university student or a フリーター (*freeta*, or free timer—one without a full-time job).

In Japan, people also revel in temporary roles, and the concern for appearance continues with the need for special clothes for every activity. Whereas a biker in Wisconsin will wear a helmet and gloves, and maybe boots, motorcycling in Japan requires full leathers. Hikers in Oregon change their shoes and grab a backpack, but in Japan, a full hiking outfit is required. If anyone is wearing blue jeans on a ski slope in Japan, it has to be a foreigner - all the Japanese skiers have the latest coordinated ski outfits, with matching luggage, even if it’s their first time on skis.

Please correct my English

Sadly, this concern for form over content is also a factor in foreign language study in Japan. Of course, when speaking Japanese, how one says things, the specific language used, is important—sometimes as important as the content. In fact, the “how” sometimes IS the “what.” No wonder students get frustrated when their native English speaking teachers tell them to worry less about mistakes and concentrate more on communication. Japanese language tries to express meaning in layers and layers of “how” and controlled ambiguity (あいまいさ); communication in English has much less focus on the how and is all about the what. The learner feels like the teacher is asking the learner to “just dance”—but don’t use your feet. Nevertheless, it is true: when you travel abroad, people you meet will care very little about how beautifully you can or can’t speak English. What they will be curious about and impressed by is your sharing of ideas, observations, and opinions, even if every one of your sentences is grammatically wrong. In the West, it’s content over form.

ガンバッテ ! Gambatte!

We will discuss schools in Chapter Eight and work in Chapter Nine, but the Japanese concern for appearances is alive and well here, too. In general, western culture appreciates results more and effort less than Japanese culture does. Always looking feverishly busy is less likely to impress an American boss than similar results produced effortlessly. Similarly, whether it is a host making a display of the effort being made for a guest, a scurrying shop or office clerk, or a

a 後輩 (*kobai*) bringing a 先輩 (*sempai*) a can of beer seem like a life or death mission, a display of excessive effort is more likely to distress a Western observer and lead him to question the sincerity (or sanity) of the performer.

Polite...or insincere?

“Don’t trust their smiles.” This is among the more curious bits of advice given to people visiting Japan for the first time. It’s hard to imagine a smile being a bad thing, but it’s easier to understand how that is possible when we look at the need for harmony discussed in Chapter Five and this chapter’s discussion of the importance of appearances. Smiles are a great social lubricant, and are useful for smoothing over all kinds of difficulties. However, as the external appearance (the smile) and the reality (true inner feeling) begin to diverge, there will be a point where the smile will no longer be effective as a healing tool, and may even have the opposite effect. At a certain point the Westerner will consider the situation so serious that the smile might be considered insensitive, or, worse, an affront or mockery. If the message is bad enough (Examples: We’re out of shrimp. Your car won’t be ready today like we promised. Yes, your dinner bill is ¥30,000. No, I have other plans this Saturday.), the wrapping needs to match the contents a bit more closely.

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 is one of the things that makes Japan unique among world cultures?
2. Can you think of other examples of this than those given in the textbook?
3. What is one difference in the clothes Japanese and Westerners wear?
4. What is more important, what you say or how you say it? Why?
5. How might a Japanese boss and a Western boss see "looking busy" differently?

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: