

EUCI's Portfolio: My life in Japan

Introduction

After graduating high school, I fulfilled one of my biggest dreams: moving to Japan! Ever since I was a child, I have been deeply fascinated by Japanese traditions, customs, and way of life, and I knew I wanted to experience them firsthand. Therefore, I began preparing for this journey on my own by studying the language, exploring the culture, and learning about their history.

Before going, I knew that the country wasn't perfect, but no country ever is. I heard stories about foreigners taking their shot and running home a few months afterwards: "*The work-life balance is not good*", "*Japanese society and its norms are too different*", and many more; but the most striking one was: "*You will always feel like an outsider: integration is impossible*".

Despite being "warned", I was happier than ever to go, and nothing was gonna stop me.

Now that this experience is over, I can say that those statements are true, to a certain extent. Have I run away after a few months? No, and every day I think about going back.

However, as I said before, no country is perfect, and I did encounter all the above-mentioned problems.

In this reflection, I would like to focus on one in particular: integration.

I will first define the term "integration", while also providing the background knowledge that helped me refine and organize my thoughts. After having built a solid academic foundation, I will present and reflect on three instances that happened during my eleven-month stay in Japan. Finally, I will give my thoughts and views about everything that will be discussed in this essay.

Concepts

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, "Integration" is defined as "the action or process of successfully joining or mixing with a different group of people" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2019). Like ink blending into water, humans in a foreign land will try to merge with the locals and their

culture. Sometimes that is an easy process, sometimes it is not: maybe it is because the newcomer poses resistance, or it is the welcoming country that has a difficult time accepting and integrating diversity.

Liang Morita (2015) states Japan still holds an ethnic nationalist view, which is an “ideology with the aim to develop an ethnically exclusive and homogeneous nationhood” (Morita, 2015:1). A symptom of this can be found in the belief that Japan should be a monoethnic society (Ibid). In relation to foreigners, this translates into the belief that newcomers should do things “the Japanese way” (Ibid). As Morita (2015:1) explains, this is because Japanese society has been a closed enclave for the past 1000 years, and its sudden exposure and collision with other ethnic groups has been a difficult shock from which recovery is not easy. As a result, part of the population prefers to interact with those with whom they are familiar with, namely other Japanese (Ibid). Concretely, this means that foreigners living in Japan have to be assimilated, rather than integrated: they have to follow the rules and adjust to a country that, sometimes, is not friendly to them.

In 2005, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR) Doudou Diene visited Japan and noted the pervasive racism present in the society and recommended anti-discrimination laws to be made (UNHCHR, 2006, cited in Morita 2015:3). As Human Rights Watch (Hassan, 2024) states, as of 2024, this hasn't happened yet, meaning that frequent discriminations, such as the notorious “Not Renting to Foreigners” situations, can, and will, continue to happen.

In our mind, this is what racism and discrimination are, but in reality, there are many more subtle ways of excluding people, for instance, through microaggressions. As Takeuchi (2022) explains, ‘microaggression’ is a “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, sexual-orientation, and religious slights and insults”, and, usually, these actions are directed towards individuals rather than groups, even though they are based on group-steriotypes (Takeuchi, 2022:253). Fortunately, or unfortunately, it seems that the ‘perpetrator’ is unaware of the discriminative nature of his action and words most of the time (Ibid).

In regard to L-2 Japanese speakers, namely those who have Japanese as their second language, another factor comes into play: the belief that only Japanese people can truly understand and

master the language (Fairbrother 2020; Gottlieb 2005, cited in Takeuchi, 2022:254). Carlson (2018, cited in Takeuchi, 2022:254) highlights a tendency of native speakers (L-1) to complement L-2 Japanese speakers on their language abilities, often with the infamous phrase “Nihongo jouzu” (“your Japanese is good”). Despite having already said that many of these microaggressions are unconsciously made by the perpetrators, they can still sound patronising to their counterparts.

I have frequently experienced these types of microaggressions, and I would like to share more about my experiences. There are many instances I could mention, but I will focus on just three.

Convenience Store Inconveniences

As someone living in Japan specifically to learn the language, I tried using my Japanese as much as possible. I had a *konbini* (convenience store) right below my apartment, where I often went to pick up some late-night food and supplies. The employees were always polite and did exactly what was expected of them. However, there were times when some employees would speak differently to me. Specifically, they did not use the polite speech form, known as *Keigo*. While it might seem like a small detail, using *Keigo* is very important in Japanese society. It is used when speaking with elders, strangers, superiors at work, and, most importantly, customers. This core aspect of the Japanese language and society is just as important as it is hard to learn and, sometimes, understand. When I realised the employee didn't use *Keigo* with me, I wasn't particularly offended, as I do not care about receiving such formalities. However, when I shared this experience with some Japanese friends, they were offended on my behalf.

After thinking about it, and speaking to some classmates at school, I concluded that it might have been done to “make things easier for me”, since *Keigo* is quite complicated even for Japanese people, so “for us ‘foreigners’ it must be even worse”. However, it is objectively a bit offensive, especially knowing that Japanese people would never be treated that way, as it is seen as disrespectful. For the sake of transparency, I would like to say that my level of Japanese at the time wasn't fluent, but neither was it beginner level; *Keigo* is hard, and I'm not sure I could carry a whole conversation in it, but I definitely did not have problems paying for a cup of coffee.

When Doing Your Job Comes with Compliments

Another anecdote would be the classic ‘nihongo jouzu!’ experience.

During my final months in Japan, I decided to get a job so that I could have the “complete 360° experience”, in a way. Naturally, not many people would hire on the spot a 19-year-old foreigner without a degree, but I still managed to find a job as a waitress in Marunouchi, the major business district in Tokyo.

During my time there, I interacted with a lot of customers: some were quite serious and aloof, while others wanted to chat and were curious about me and our international staff.

I remember serving two lovely and talkative Japanese ladies. They asked me all sorts of questions, “*Where are you from?*”, “*How old are you?*”, “*What are your plans for the future?*”, and such. Naturally, the conversation happened in Japanese, and, at some point, they complimented me with the good old “nihongo jouzu!”. I was both flattered and a bit surprised. Flattered, because, as I said, my Japanese is far from perfect, so I still appreciate it when natives compliment me; but I was also a bit surprised, because in my mind, and perhaps I’m wrong, this is also a standard compliment when your Japanese is not that good, but they still appreciate you trying. Even though the majority of my colleagues and I were foreigners, we still worked in a corporate area and mainly had Japanese clients: it was expected of us to have a certain level of proficiency to properly do our job. I remember thinking “Why, thank you, that is so nice to hear!”, and at the same time, “Is my Japanese that bad that I still get this kind of compliments?”. Given the context in which it was said, I am absolutely sure they meant it as a compliment, specifically because my Japanese *was not* that bad. However, I still felt a moment of confusion, especially considering that having conversational Japanese is a job requirement.

That Time I Spoke and Got Mentally Deported

Another very common, but very real experience is life on the Japanese subway system. Generally, there is only one rule: Be Quiet. Of course, there are exceptions, and one needs to read the room (or car, aha), but if everyone is quiet, then you should be as well. I think this is one of the rules I appreciated and loved the most about Japan. I truly resonated with it, and, after getting used to it, hearing people being loud started bothering me as well. I’ve always tried my best to be respectful and quiet, but that cannot always happen, especially when you are with friends.

I remember one evening, in early spring, being on the way home with some of my housemates: we went to a festival and were a bit tired, and so we failed to properly check the volume of our

voices. While we were chatting among ourselves, I remember meeting the stare of a not-so-happy lady. I started speaking in a very hushed tone, hoping to convey my intentions and make them lower their voices as well. At some point, I had to verbally say to quiet down, because more people started to stare. I found that this is a very effective method:



glaring. It is not only used in public transport, but also in every uncomfortable situation. Being quiet on public transport is not only a gesture of politeness, but it is a fundamental social norm. On another note, during my stay, I saw this poster (Fahey, 2024) on the subway wall, and it surprised me quite a bit. I heard that it was made because people started making TikTok trends on the metro, triggering the anger of passengers so much that new official statements had to be made. This is one of them. Unsurprisingly, this poster went viral, and the company faced accusations of racist behaviours, which they denied, claiming that the image of monkeys holds different cultural meanings in the East and the West (Fahey, 2024). What was the real reason behind this choice? I am not sure, but it unsettled me quite a bit.

Thoughts and Reflections

Overall, I think that if someone wants to live in Japan, or any other country, they need to have a thick skin, at least to some extent, and not be bothered by these microaggressions. Sadly, at least in my opinion, they also need to accept that they will never be fully recognized as Japanese. You will make friends, both Japanese and international, you will build a community, and yet somehow you will never be fully integrated. Even if you feel Japanese, others might not see you that way. You will have a hard time finding accommodation, even after improving your language and social etiquette skills.

I still think Japan is a beautiful country, and living there permanently is still a dream of mine. What I have experienced made me reflect deeply, because while I have only shared examples of microaggressions, that doesn't mean I have not faced more overt and 'classical' discrimination.

All of this sparked a deep reflection within me, especially because, as a white European, I had never before experienced discrimination directly. This has truly been a wake-up call. While my experience is by no means comparable to the hardships many others endure, it has made me critically think about these societies we live in and how much work is still needed to create truly inclusive communities. It has also strengthened my view on the importance of empathy and understanding, as the desire to belong and be accepted has no boundaries.

Reference List

Cambridge Dictionary (2019). *INTEGRATION* | meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary. [online] Cambridge.org. Available at: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/integration> [Accessed 17 Jul. 2025].

Fahey, R. (2024). *Racism row erupts after monkeys used to portray unruly train passengers.* [online] The Mirror. Available at: <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/racism-row-erupts-after-japan-34164005> [Accessed 15 Jul. 2025].

Hassan, T. (2024). *World Report 2025: Rights Trends in Japan.* [online] Human Rights Watch. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2025/country-chapters/japan> [Accessed 17 Jul. 2025].

Morita, L. (2015). Some Manifestations of Japanese Exclusionism. *SAGE Open*, [online] 5(3), pp.1–6. Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epub/10.1177/2158244015600036> [Accessed 2 Jul. 2025].

Takeuchi, J.D. (2023). Code-switching as linguistic microaggression: L2-Japanese and speaker legitimacy. *Multilingua*, [online] 42(2), pp.249–283. Available at: <https://www-degruyterbrill-com.ezproxy.ub.gu.se/document/doi/10.1515%2Fmulti-2021-0069/pdf?stream=true> [Accessed 2 Jul. 2025].