

BLOGROLL

Tofugu

A "wonky Japanese language and culture blog" is how Tofugu.com describes itself. While posts come from multiple contributors, the driving force behind Tofugu.com is 23-year-old Koichi, who prefers to be known only by his middle name and lives in Portland, Oregon. The blog covers a variety of news, oddities and tips, but much of it is fueled by Koichi's passion for the study of the Japanese language, which he's been studying for eight years. Past posts include one on the wisdom of learning Japanese from Yoda, a YouTube series on Koichi's favorite online resources, ways to get free lessons, and so on.

Tofugu.com sprang out of Koichiben, another blog launched by Koichi, which pretty much does things in reverse by appealing to Japanese readers with posts about unique facets of American culture and twists on the standard English lesson, such as how to respond to "What's up?" The two sites work to bridge gaps between the East and West and are held



together by creative findings, witty anecdotes and inspiring YouTube videos featuring the charismatic Koichi.

In this interview with The Japan Times Online, Koichi talks about the blogs' conception, an "eBay of teaching," the importance of reader participation and the conclusive outcome of the battle of Godzilla vs. King Kong.

When and how did the idea for Tofugu come

about?

Originally, I only had Koichiben.com, which was for Japanese people to learn about American culture and English. Every once in a while, I did posts/videos in English, and was surprised at how popular these were. I didn't think much of it at first, but then I started learning about branding, and realized that trying to combine Koichiben and English Koichiben was a mistake. So, I rebranded "English Koichiben" as "Tofugu" and it's worked out pretty well.

On the site you say that Tofugu is the English extension of Koichiben. Could you explain a bit about what Koichiben is all about?

Well, I wouldn't say it's an extension anymore. A year or so ago I would have considered it that, but it's become it's own thing now. Tofugu is much more popular than Koichiben, and the people that read each have finally separated out into their own communities.

Koichiben is a Web site for Japanese people to learn about American culture and English. I try not to talk about the very "normal things," but try to delve into subjects that most Japanese don't have the resources to learn about, unless they make it over to America. Every once in a while I'll do an English lesson, but I always stay away from the conventional stuff. I do things like "pronunciation of 'th' " or "how to respond to 'what's up.' " Things that are difficult to find somewhere else. I originally started Koichiben for an independent study at my university, since I had finished all the Japanese classes available by the end of my sophomore year. My advisor was really nice, and allowed me to make videos and write a blog in Japanese for credit. From there, it grew, and even though I've graduated, I still continue writing it. It's a lot of fun.

Neither you nor your contributors live in Japan. Does this ever present any problems?

It definitely would be nice to live in Japan (for all sorts of reasons). I feel like we'd be able to come up with more content and take more pictures/videos, which would be cool, but so far it's working out OK being based here in America (I can write more content for Koichiben!). For the most part, we try to write on somewhat intellectual topics, but make them

easy and fun to read. As a Japanese major I had to read a lot of books that analyzed Japanese society and culture, so some of my articles just summarize and simplify the things I've already learned. Another portion of our articles involves the Japanese language, which is something you can learn from anywhere. I'm still studying Japanese, so I share things I've gone through, resources I've found, etc., and that's all stuff you don't need to be living in Japan for.

Though, yes, I think living in Japan would only make our content better.

Has blogging become a full-time job for you?

I really don't spend that much time blogging, though sometimes I wish I could spend more. It definitely doesn't replace my income, but blogging pays for food, gas, hosting fees, plus some, and time vs. money is usually more than minimum wage. Currently I'm the marketing manager at eduFire.com, which is an online platform that lets you teach and learn online. It's kind of like the Ebay of teaching, where a teacher can come on, set their price, and teach whatever they want live via Webcam (plus a plethora of other tools). I'm also teaching some Japanese and Social Marketing classes to supplement the income. In other words, I'm working at home and living the dream, despite the current, degrading economy.

A lot of your posts, like the one about voting for the new Nara mascot, encourage participation from readers. How has that gone? Have you learned any lessons along the way? Any dream projects involving reader participation?

It's all about reader participation, even if that only means a comment on a post. Reader participation means a better community, and that's something I've always strived for. It's fun to get people involved beyond that when I can, but I don't want to do it too much or I might tire the readers out. When I was writing my senior thesis, which was about "how people learn Japanese," I got around 300 people to participate in a survey, which was amazing. That's still my dream project, since I'm turning that data into an e-book, to be released "someday." I think the original date was fall 2008? We need to start implementing 36 hour days, I think.

You must get a few visitors that are completely oblivious to Japan. Is there a common misconception that you come across a lot?

One of my mantras is "you can't learn Japanese from anime, so stop trying." That's what started English Koichiben, I think. There are all sorts of things people are oblivious to, but it's the fault of media and a lack of information out there, in some respects. Whenever I get more than one question about something that people are confused about, I'll try to write about it. (Aha, another way to get original content!).

Vice versa, have you run into any misconceptions that Japanese have about America on Koichiben?

Besides the fact that we love fast food and are overweight? Well, actually, that could be generally true. Big fan of Taco Bell right here.

People are nice on Koichiben and aren't as quick to judge, in general. It's an entirely different community with different needs. It's neat to see how Tofugu and Koichiben differ, sometimes.

Do you ever find yourself faced with the dilemma of wanting to present something that is Japanese, but also not wanting to come off as too critical because of the very nature of the story? (For example: "The 'No Gaijin' mentality" and "Maid cafes just got creepier: Mom cafes").

Definitely. All the time. I usually do it anyways, though some things have been nixed by the other Tofugu writers as "too much," so I wasn't allowed to share them. One of my most controversial articles was "Japanese are unimpressed with your Japanese," which talked about how when a *gaijin* speaks in Japanese, no matter how terrible it is, they will get ridiculous amounts of praise. Everything was based on good research; I had talked with a professor of linguistics (who is Japanese), and read a book on it, which was research done by a respected Japanese linguist, in Japan. Everything was solid, but the reaction was startling, mostly by Japanese. You can read the article and decide for yourself. I understand both sides of the argument, but on the Internet, you can't expect the other side to be very nice about it.

On the other hand, I like to try and throw in

"negative" articles, just because so many people have a too sparkly picture of Japan. Many American *otaku* think Japan is perfect in every way, and I think it's important to try and paint a fair picture of the positives and negatives of a country, otherwise you will have unrealistic expectations. I love Japan, but I'm not about to give people the wrong idea about things.

How about with Koichiben? Have there been any times that you were hesitant about a post related to American culture?

Koichiben's much easier. American readers/viewers don't seem to care as much (or just can't read it). Sometimes, though, a Koichiben video will be featured on the American Youtube page (because I put my location down as Japan, but have the video location in America) and I'll get a ton of people getting pissed off that it's in Japanese — luckily they don't know what I'm saying, too, so it doesn't matter as much.

Tofugu is pretty informative for those interested in learning about Japan, but what has it done for you?

I've become a better writer, and a better speaker (not only Japanese, English too). I've also learned a lot from my readers. They are always telling me more information that I didn't know about, or tell me new ways to learn Japanese, etc. The people are absolutely great, and they help me become a better person (and hopefully I can do something in return).

How has Tofugu fared in your attempts to incorporate it into the world of YouTube?

Youtube is how I got all of my viewers in the first place. People who are out there writing their random blogs without incorporating other social sites need to do so. I used Youtube to get people interested in Tofugu, and eventually, get them to click on the links that send them to tofugu.com. It's a great way to do some free social marketing. I've added a bunch of other things to my arsenal as well. Things like Twitter, StumbleUpon, etc., are all great ways to drive new traffic to your Web sites.

Where's the future of Tofugu headed? Any specific plans we should keep an eye open for?

I wish I had some specific plans . . .

Recently, Tofugu has been steering toward "learning Japanese." I've definitely taken advantage of my position at eduFire to help people learn Japanese, which has been really great. Not only have we really ramped up the Japanese section (and are currently offering free Japanese classes), but I've been teaching my fair share as well, which lets me get to know my readers even better. There's been a lot of positive feedback, and a lot of people who never would have had a chance to learn Japanese otherwise now have that chance. For some reason there's a lot of people from Norway. They must not have Japanese in their schools there :)

You made a Godzilla vs. King Kong desktop wallpaper for Tofugu fans. So, Godzilla vs. King Kong, where would you place your bet? Explain.

Pshh, Godzilla, for sure. I can't believe you would even need to ask.

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