

Chapter Fifteen - Culture Shock

I. Reading

Shocked, but in which way?

After food and language, culture shock is the biggest concern to those planning on traveling or living in a foreign country. Everyone uses the expression, but the precise meaning or meanings aren't often considered. What is culture shock, really?

One kind of culture shock is the shock of the new and unexpected, and it's the kind of experience anyone will have when traveling to another country for the first time. This kind of culture shock can be caused by being surrounded by the sounds of a foreign language, people driving on the "wrong" side of the road, unusual customs, or ways of dressing. Visitors to Japan might experience culture shock by having to remember to take off their shoes (and when not to), by having to use chopsticks, or by having to bow instead of shaking hands. Japanese travelers may be bothered by ordering food without the benefit of plastic models in the restaurant window, by having to leave a tip, or by being surrounded by much larger people. The reaction to these differences may be negative, but they may be positive, too. These new experiences may cause some travelers much stress, but others might find these challenges invigorating and exciting.



Those who stay for a longer time in a foreign country might experience a second kind of culture shock. After a while, these differences are no longer novelties, and the excitement of the new may wear off. If one has a difficult time accepting or adjusting to these changes, they can become a burden and an irritation, and can result in negative feelings toward the whole culture and people of the country one is visiting. It's usually around this time that homesickness sets in. One is confronted with a steady stream of hardships, and we remember our home country where none of these kinds of problems existed. There, we were surrounded by the easy and the familiar, as well as friends and family. These positive and negative feelings often come in waves: one week a person will love everything about the foreign country he's visiting, but the next, he'll hate everything about it. The longer one stays in the country, however, the more these waves flatten out.

If you stay long enough in a foreign country, you will probably experience a third kind of culture shock. You will stay long enough so that the country's language, culture, food, and customs become quite familiar. You start to feel as if you're "living" and not "living in a foreign country." Still, one's culture goes very deep, and it affects how we see everything, including our own selves. In your new country you will *understand* completely how things are done and why. However, the problem will be that deep inside, you still *feel* uncomfortable with certain aspects of the culture. Remember our visitor to Japan on a rush hour train in Chapter Twelve. He knows the people pushing him mean nothing by it, yet, deep inside, part of him still feels extremely uncomfortable. He knows they're not behaving in a hostile manner, yet a feeling

deep inside that he can't change is telling him that they are. A Japanese visitor may feel the same frustration with conversation patterns. His English may be excellent, yet, when he talks with his non-Japanese friends, the pattern of conversation doesn't give him the same feedback or satisfaction that he gets when he talks with his friends back home.

Hurts so good

This last kind of culture shock is the hardest kind of culture shock to deal with. That's because no amount of studying or understanding will help. One *already* understands. What is causing the discomfort is happening at a very deep level. The foreign friends can't *be* different, any more than the visitor can *be* different. What we know and what we feel don't agree, and this makes us feel very, very bad.

There's good news, though. If you've ever been serious about a sport, or engaged in some other kind of physical activity, you know that after a day of hard practice, your muscles ache all over. This pain that you feel is actually the muscles rebuilding themselves; they have to tear slightly so that they can rebuild themselves bigger and stronger. If you find yourself in a foreign country struggling with this third kind of culture shock, try to remember that muscle ache. What's happening is that you're growing - building a new, additional self. Little by little you will be able to feel your Japanese self and then your other self along with it. You won't be any less Japanese. You'll be able to function as completely and comfortably in Japan as you could as if you had never eaten a single Big Mac. However, you'll also be able to feel a similar ease in the foreign culture that you have been studying so long. All your years of language study, all your struggles to get along in a foreign culture, all the lonely, homesick nights you endured will have paid off.

Congratulations. おめでとうございます(*omedetougozaimasu*)!

Reverse Culture Shock - ここはどこ？

You might think that once you've gotten that far, you're safe. Not so fast, Taro.

In your English language studies, your culture classes, and here in this book, we've talked a great deal about how to adjust to living in a foreign country. Why not? It's a major undertaking, and years of study and preparation are needed if one is to be successful. The problem is, very few people prepare, or even talk about one of the hardest things about going away: coming back.

This isn't so surprising, if you think about it. When you leave Japan, your memories get somewhat frozen in time. While you are abroad, the picture you have of your brother or sister, of your best friend, your neighborhood is the one you take with you. Whatever changes happen - a haircut, a tattoo, a new shop on the corner, all the things you would observe day by day if you were in Japan - none of those things get recorded. Plus, your memory also changes the picture a bit - perhaps you remember your sister a bit thinner, your street a bit wider - than she or it actually are, so the picture you return to Japan with doesn't really match what you see when you arrive. Plus, when you lived in Japan, you occupied a special role in many people's lives. The minute your plane took off, however, that spot began to change and get re-defined. Everyone's life kept on going, but, in your mind, Japan life was frozen as it was on the day you left. Unless you're prepared for this, the effect can be quite discomfoting.

Of course, there's another dimension to all this. To everyone you left behind in Japan, *you* were frozen in their memory as well. While you were away, they remembered the you that you were before you left Japan. The trouble is, with the wealth of new experiences and challenges you

Us and Them

faced everyday, you have been growing at a greatly accelerated pace.

Now imagine what happens when you return to Japan. You aren't the person who left, no one you knew is who you remember, Japan looks like a foreign country, or perhaps a Twilight Zone version of Japan. Your friends are using new slang that you can't understand and the words you use are sounding suddenly old fashioned. Friend's cell phones have features you can't understand, and they like music you've never heard before.

After a day or two of this, your impulse may be to head for the airport and buy a one-way ticket back to your foreign "home." Of course, this re-adjustment trouble is completely natural. The old and familiar has changed, and so have you. However, you have grown, and you have acquired the skills you need to cope in an unfamiliar environment. You just need to apply them to *this* new, unfamiliar environment. Your home.



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 different kinds of culture shock are there?
2. What are some things one might do to avoid or lessen the effects of culture shock?
3. What is one positive thing we can say about culture shock?
4. What is reverse culture shock?
5. What are some things one might do to avoid or lessen the effects of reverse culture shock?

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: