

In the first half of September I went to Japan, to take part in the latest Anglo-Japanese classical conference (now widened to be Western-Japanese), in Nagoya, and afterwards to repeat in Nagoya the lecture and in Tokyo the lecture and the seminar which I gave in China. Japan like the rest of the northern hemisphere had had a particularly hot summer (up to 45 C = 113 F at its worst), and when I was there was around 25-30 C = 70's-80's F, cloudy, humid, with rain sometimes heavy but fortunately none at the times when it would have been most inconvenient. And more: on the first day of the conference Japan was hit by its worst typhoon for 25 years, which caused damage and disruption (though it wasn't as bad as the one which hit the Philippines and Hong Kong a couple of weeks later), but fortunately passed over Nagoya in the middle of the day when we were indoors conferring; and two days later there was a serious earthquake, but in Hokkaido, the northernmost island, a long way from where I was. Nagoya isn't a major tourist destination; there were many Americans in Tokyo.

The flight between London and Tokyo takes 11 hours, overnight west to east and a long day east to west; I was able to fly business class. I had been to Japan in 2005, and remembered or soon rediscovered various features: the country is highly civilised (apart from addictions to sumo wrestling and pachenko (gambling machines) and enjoyable, and has taken what it wants from the west, making technological improvements, but has not abandoned its own traditions. Many of the younger women are people of considerable poise (smart or fashionably casual, with an upright and confident manner). Otherwise: a spaghetti of overhead electricity cables; driving on the left; cyclists on the pavements [sidewalks], often without bell or lights; illuminated batons wielded by traffic police, and white gloves worn by such people as railway officials (but the hotel doorman who combined a top hat with a casual shirt was committing what the philosopher Gilbert Ryle would have called a category mistake); taxis with a special control to allow the driver to open and close the passenger door (and some of the newest taxis are Toyota imitations of London black cabs); omnipresent vending machines, selling mostly soft drinks; superb department stores, with restaurants of different kinds on the top floors and a food hall in the basement; a few Japanese taking their dogs around in push-chairs. Public transport is highly efficient and reliable (the shinkansen, bullet trains, are not occasional specials but on the Tokyo - Nagoya - Kyoto - Osaka line there is a 15-coach train every ten minutes; and there is not a grudgingly-provided quiet coach but throughout all trains people are instructed to switch mobile phones to silent mode), and there and elsewhere in the cities there are enough notices in the Latin alphabet to enable a gaijin (barbarian) to manage without an escort (Portuguese being one of the languages used in Nagoya, for the benefit of the descendants of Japanese who emigrated to Brazil in the 19th century but come back to work for Toyota). The Japanese are not totally consistent: on stations there are places where one is told to walk on the right and places where one is told to walk on the left

(sometimes both on the same station); on escalators one stands on the left in Tokyo and Nagoya but on the right in Kyoto and Osaka; and people don't always obey. Smart cards are used on public transport and for some small purchases, but otherwise the Japanese prefer to make payments in cash. On the television some news bulletins and a few other programmes are "bilingual", i.e. an English voice-over is available; but my impression was that this is less well publicised than in 2005; I had to ask my Tokyo hotel how to obtain the English version.

One change is that in 2005 smoking was allowed almost everywhere but now there are many places where it is not; and until my last day I thought the Japanese had abandoned the practice of making a V sign with their fingers when being photographed, but on the last day I saw many instances of it. A practice which I don't remember from 2005 but which probably already existed is that if you go into a restaurant with a bag you don't place it untidily on the floor beside your chair but are given a box to put it in. Baths are half-length (the only place where I found a full-length bath was the old and grand hotel at Nikko, in the mountains north of Tokyo, which I visited in 2005 but not this time). Japanese high-tech Toto toilets will empty you, wash you, dry you and put you to bed if you press the buttons in the right order (but probably swallow you and disgorge you into the sewers if you press them in the wrong order); public toilets are plentiful and immaculate (and some men's urinals make provision for parking your umbrella while you perform: the Japanese think of everything), except that often there is no provision for drying your hands after you have washed them, since you are expected to use your handkerchief for that. Japan shows more concern for Health and Safety than most countries outside northern Europe and North America (e.g. handrails, ramps, raised and coloured spots and lines on pavements -- the last I think on a greater scale than in other countries).

The hotels offered a western breakfast (with orange marmalade) and I had that. Otherwise I ate mostly Japanese, occasionally Italian, twice Indian and once Chinese. Elaborate Japanese meals are puzzling to foreigners in that many small courses come in no obvious order, so that it's hard to tell whether you are near the end or not yet half-way. I was once expected to eat sitting on a low platform with legs folded under me, but was able to cheat, sitting diagonally near the edge of the platform and letting my legs hang down.

The conference, functioning entirely in English, had good papers, from Japanese scholars as well as westerners (there are a fair number of Japanese classicists, but spread thinly across a large number of institutions), but (I suspect out of social and / or linguistic shyness) the Japanese played disappointingly little part in the discussion of the papers. Afterwards we were taken on an excursion to Ise, where there is a major Shinto shrine (the main religions in Japan are Shinto and

Buddhism): the main buildings of the shrine are rebuilt on an adjacent site every twenty years, so having been both in 2005 and this year I've seen both the right-hand and the left-hand version. In Nagoya and in Tokyo I saw a mixture of things I had seen in 2005 and things I hadn't seen then (in Nagoya I saw the last ever exhibition at the Nagoya-Boston Museum of Fine Arts: Nagoya is concentrating its cultural budget on restoring the Castle, and can no longer afford to borrow exhibits from Boston). In Tokyo I was able to go to an Anglican church, appropriately dedicated to St. Alban, the first English saint, which has English services regularly; in Nagoya there is an English Anglican service only once a month and I wasn't there on the right Sunday; another church there has English services every Sunday but at a time which conflicted with my other commitments).