

【研究ノート】

A Kiwi living in Shonai

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Whenever I tell people that I live in Japan, most people are shocked to hear that I do not live in one of the main centres. In fact, where I live is both geographically and culturally about as far from the main centres as you can possibly get. I was brought up in Lower Hutt, part of Wellington, the capital of Aotearoa New Zealand, and I first came to the Shonai region of Yamagata as an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) on the JET Programme in 2010. It is a testament to the place that I am still living here more than five years later. It is important to keep in mind that this essay is purely opinion-based, and there are many anecdotes, although empirical data has been used when appropriate. This essay will firstly describe the similarities between New Zealand and Shonai that make them both wonderful places to live in. Secondly, the essay will contrast differences between the two places I call home, such as the balance between work and life and the role of women, and in the process offer advice from the perspective of a Kiwi living in Shonai.

Wherever you are in New Zealand, it is easy to get out into nature. This is true whether you live in the countryside, or even in the centre of a big city like Wellington or Auckland. Shonai is very similar in that respect with the sea, rivers, waterfalls and mountains all within a stone's throw. It is always very tempting to go out for a swim or bike ride in the summer, go mountain climbing or riverboat riding to see the colorful foliage in the autumn, go snowboarding or skiing in the winter, and to top it off, enjoy some locally made Nihonshu under the cherry blossoms with friends during the spring.

For someone like me who enjoys instantly being able to get out into nature, Shonai has everything I need right at my doorstep.

Not only can you enjoy nature like in New Zealand, but you can also enjoy the wonderful food on offer year-round. The freshest fish is available from the Sea of Japan, and a various array of mountain vegetables and other locally picked delicacies are readily available to complement some of the best rice that Japan has to offer. New Zealand and Shonai both have a strong agricultural industry and it is hard to beat a good meal at one of Shonai's many traditional Japanese restaurants, or even a simple home-cooked meal. It's not just me who thinks this about the food: Tsuruoka City, to the south, was recently named a creative city of gastronomy by UNESCO for its gastronomical and agricultural prowess (Tsuruoka Creative City of Gastronomy Promotion Council, n.d.). In other words, Shonai offers some of the best cuisine in Japan, a nation that for good reason prides itself on its food.

Shonai is also the home to a very deep and rich culture. Firstly the Three Mountains of Dewa; Mt. Haguro, Mt. Gassan and Mt. Yudonosan, have been the home to *shugendo* pilgrimages for centuries now (for more see Sekimori, 2005, and Sekimori, 2009). Other amazing places that I love to visit include Tamasudare falls and Maruike lake, as well as other historical places such as the Sankyo Rice Warehouses, Soumaro where performances by trainee *Geisha* called *Maiko* are given, the Domon Ken Photography Museum, Kaikouji where mummies are kept, Gyokusenji with its world class gardens, not to mention the Former Honma Residence, once home to one of the richest families in Japan. This much history and culture is all available within the Shonai region and it is sometimes very hard to justify leaving.

In terms of length of time, New Zealand's history pails in comparison to Japan's, however its depth of culture is another story altogether. New Zealand prides itself in being the home of the indigenous Maori. Aotearoa is the Maori word for New Zealand and means 'The Land of the Long White Cloud'. Due to New Zealand's dominance in rugby, perhaps the most famous part of Maori culture is the Haka, a war dance performed before international matches of any sport. Te Reo Maori is one of the country's three national languages (the others being New Zealand English and New Zealand Sign Language) and has enjoyed a revival since the 1980s with inclusion as a compulsory subject until the first year of high school, all official governmental forms and signs requiring the inclusion of Maori, as well as a television channel (for more see May, 1999). Japan could follow in New Zealand's footsteps with support for indigenous languages such as Ainu and Ryukyu, however New Zealand still has a long way to go to improve the status of Maori culture and language in everyday life.

One big difference between Japanese and New Zealanders is their attitude to work. New Zealanders tend to 'work to live' as opposed to the Japanese tendency to 'live to work'. If your shift finishes at 5pm, most New Zealanders would already be out the door by then. In contrast, Japanese people generally feel uncomfortable leaving before their superiors, and *sabisu zangyo*, or unpaid overtime, is not unheard of. Nevertheless, something should be said for the dedication that the Japanese give to their work. New Zealanders in general have a "she'll be right" attitude, meaning we think things will always work out for the best. I am of the belief that we should try our best at everything we do so that we don't leave the results to fate, and it seems this is built in to the psyche of the average Japanese person. New Zealanders could potentially achieve better work results if they followed this mantra.

In saying that, there is a limit. In my experience Japanese people often stay at work later than a New Zealander would. I often get the impression that the reason for this is that the Japanese are working for social conformity, rather than to support their lifestyles. In Japan, either due to company policy or for personal reasons, people are less inclined to take a break from work for fear of burdening their coworkers or companies, which would in turn leave a bad social image. It seems that they are more worried about keeping their job than enjoying what life has to offer. This leads to things such as *karoshi*, the Japanese term for death from overwork, a term so prevalent that it has entered the English lexicon. Fortunately in recent years the Japanese government has been cutting down on so-called “black companies”, or companies that conduct unethical business practices, which shows that it is not something that has just been pushed under the rug.

Politically New Zealand and Japan are quite opposite with New Zealand being relatively progressive and Japan being relatively conservative in their approach to governance. This may lead to what in my opinion is the biggest difference between New Zealand and Japan: the role of women. From what I have seen Japan is still a very patriarchal society, and even though more and more women have been entering the workforce for decades now, it is still very common to see a split between the traditional role of males and females in a household. In New Zealand, the distinction between traditional male and female roles has been blurring extensively over the past 50 or so years, and in my own case I split the housekeeping duties with my wife. This is not only so in private life but also in public. In 2006 New Zealand’s Prime Minister, Governor General, and the CEO of its largest company were all roles held by women. Since 1999 the percentage of women in parliament in New Zealand has stagnated at around 33%, which is much higher than Japan who are yet to reach 10%, and it is said

that if Japan were to remove barriers to women's participation in the workplace, that they would see more returns on their investment in human capital (World Economic Forum, 2015, p. 41). This does not mean to say that Japan has not been changing, however, and as with black companies a change is on the horizon in Japan.

Current Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has recently pledged policies that encourage the presence of women in high-power roles, including doubling the number in ministerial positions (World Economic Form, 2015, p. 27). Not only that, but the term *ikumen*, or males who help out with child rearing, has been gaining increased popularity recently, showing an increase in the number of men wanting to provide more support in the household. To further advance the power of women in Japan, I feel we should also try to improve current overall work conditions. I have heard of a lot of women who would like to work, but not in a Japanese company due to the work conditions. This limits the amount of money a household earns, meaning the expensive process of raising a child is overlooked, further impacting the aging society. By allowing women to choose to work in a place where they feel welcomed and have their needs met, not only will women be able to reap the rewards of working to their full potential, but the burden of an aging society will also be reduced.

This essay has discussed the reasons why a Kiwi would choose to live in the Shonai region of Yamagata, Japan, while also offering some points of advice for the two cultures that I call home. If you could choose to live anywhere in the world, where would you choose? For me, I was very fortunate to come across the Shonai region, a place that has become my second home. Although this essay is by no means academic due to the many anecdotes and opinions, I hope it has made you consider your current living situation in an effort to help us all appreciate the places we live in.

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