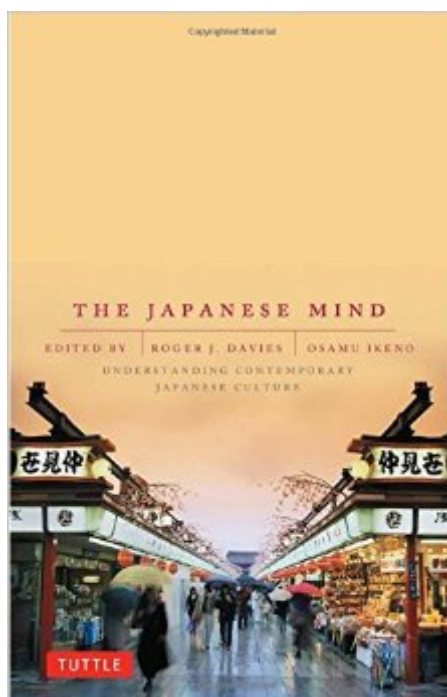


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The Japanese Mind: Understanding Contemporary Japanese Culture



Synopsis

In *The Japanese Mind*, Roger Davies offers Westerners an invaluable key to the unique aspects of Japanese culture. Readers of this book will gain a clear understanding of what really makes the Japanese, and their society, tick. Among the topics explored: *aimai* (ambiguity), *amae* (dependence upon others' benevolence), *amakudari* (the nation's descent from heaven), *chinmoku* (silence in communication), *gambari* (perseverance), *giri* (social obligation), *haragei* (literally, "belly art"; implicit, unspoken communication), *kenkyo* (the appearance of modesty), *sempai-kohai* (seniority), *wabi-sabi* (simplicity and elegance), and *zoto* (gift giving), as well as discussions of child-rearing, personal space, and the roles of women in Japanese society. Includes discussion topics and questions after each chapter. All in all, this book is an easy-to-use introduction to the distinguishing characteristics of Japanese society; an invaluable resource for anyone—business people, travelers, or students—perfect for course adoption, but also for anyone interested in Japanese culture. Next in this series: Now available separately, *Japanese Culture: The Religious and Philosophical Foundations* is a fascinating journey through Japan's rich cultural history.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I stumbled upon this thoroughly enlightening book at the end of my third year of living in a small bucolic town in the mountains of rural Japan. While it is intended as an overview and introduction to various things that can make the Japanese seem different and enigmatic to outsiders, many of the topics are discussed from their historical evolution, which helps to construct them in a much fuller

and as a more complete figure. Moreover, the subjects covered are often unobservable to the casual visitor and neophytic foreign transplant, yet are central to understanding the Japanese character. Where I had just simply witnessed and pondered over many baffling and seemingly contradictory actions of the people whom I was residing amongst at first, after reading this book I came to understand them in a much clearer and tolerant way. Another result, incidentally, was it also helped ease me through an extremely delayed case of culture shock. We should note that problems arise not through stereotyping (which, despite our fanatical political correctness at times does tend to be accurate more often than not), but when we use these generalizations to assert a cultural superiority, or inferiority as the case may be, and to define differences as being anything other than such. This wonderful little book is clearly written by Japanese college students, and edited by the professors who guided them, in a style that makes even opaque concepts accessible. Ritualistic behavior is deconstructed in plain and precise language, in a conciseness that is also equally typical of the Japanese. It is organized into twenty-eight mostly interconnected chapters, though you can read them in any order you prefer.

[This was originally written for the JALT (The Japan Association of Language Teachers) Journal's Book Reviews Section] At 270 pages, this is a slim collection of essays on "key concepts in Japanese culture" (p. 1). Intended as a text, each of the 28 essays is followed by discussion questions which are separated into two groups: one for Japanese students of EFL and the other for foreign students of Japanese Studies. Furthermore, the co-editors intended that through clarity, well-documented research, and demonstrated field-testing, the text would also appeal to the general reader. Unfortunately, this text fails on almost all accounts. Written by Japanese undergraduate seniors, the explanations are simplistic, superficial, and inconsistent. The first essay on the purportedly unique-to-Japan *chinmoku* (silence) is an illustration. It is used during times of thoughtfulness, hesitation, restraint, conflict avoidance, defiance, and indifference, in public and in private (pp. 53-55). This "unique" Japanese cultural trait has been defined so broadly as to become meaningless, since it covers almost every moment of silence one could experience anywhere. The superficiality of the research is reflected in the use of E. Reischauer's (1990) comments originally made in 1977 on the contemporary status of marriage in Japan: "Japanese women are often said to have difficulty in socializing freely... However, women seem willing to play their own roles in maintaining the household as good wives and mothers" (p. 67). One wonders how "freely" socializing women or "good wives and mothers" who are unhappy with their roles and divorce their husbands fit into these nearly thirty-year-old arguments. There is also the incorrect statement that

White Day is only found in Japan (p. 98).

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