

# Becoming Japanese

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*You have become Japanese* is something that Japanese frequently tell me, usually after they hear me play shakuhachi or hear me speak about the history or aesthetics of Japanese music. They mean well, and such is their way of paying compliment to my efforts and abilities in mastering arcane aspects of the Japanese society that they themselves are barely aware of or interested in. But I always feel uncomfortable when I hear these words.

The fact that one can remain an outsider yet act and perform like the consummate insider is what really baffles most Japanese. Since it is beyond comprehension that the outsider masters the shakuhachi, they allow me honorary status as an insider, a “Japanese,” therefore sustaining the myth that their culture is only understandable by the Japanese themselves. They pull me into their sphere so they don’t have to contend with a seeming contradiction.

The way of thinking in Japan does not depend upon dialectics; there are no opposing opinions or arguments that people defend or debunk and thereby try to reach a transcendental truth. Distinct minorities—or opposing ways of thinking—in Japan are usually either ignored or subsumed into the majority. Like a huge macrophage, the larger entities swallow the lesser ones until the organism is whole again. Granted, when a greater body subsumes a smaller one, the large one changes and adjusts to some extent, and this does allow for growth and change. But change is gradual and never revolutionary. Discourse in this society basically evolves as one entity where everyone operates under a consensus that eschews opposing views.

But becoming a Japanese is the last thing on earth I would ever want to happen. It is precisely that I am not Japanese, and never will be, that gives meaning to what I do and who I am. The objectivity afforded by being an outsider in this society is without equal, and I would not trade that view for anything. Not surprisingly, there is a phrase for this kind of approach in Japanese: *tsukazu hanarezu* 付かず離れず “neither attached nor removed.”

The path I tread remains my own. Learning Japanese language, customs, etiquette and music and sharing it with others is just my way of fulfilling my own destiny. Although I like to think I live my life for others, it is mostly for myself that I live.