

Lowell Speech draft
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When I was young, my parents once caught me hiding in my bed, playing Pokemon. Typically it would be a time for family education. Not surprisingly, there was a long speech about why I should study more, instead of playing video game. But in my case, my parents had one different concern.

“This is a Japanese game right? You know what, we’re not friends with Japan.”

As some of you may know, China suffered tremendously during WWII. And without exaggeration, with 300,000 people killed, my hometown Nanjing was probably the most tortured city under Japanese invasion. As a result, my parents’ generation, especially those who lived in Nanjing, has been pretty hostile towards Japan. Not surprisingly, as a child from Nanjing, Japan has been a mysterious ‘enemy’ in my mind.

Then I went to high school, when I started staying up late and was introduced to the best late night snack, which is Japanese ramen. In fact, not only did I learn about ramen, my high education also introduced a tiny glimpse of Japanese art, architecture, cuisine, and culture. However, the more I learned about Japan, the more confused I became. Because for so long, Japan’s image has always been an enemy. I’ve never even thought about the possibility for an ‘enemy’ to have its own uniquely amazing history, art and culture. Suddenly, two opposing forces in my mind, biased hostility and curiosity, were joined and came into conflict. What resulted, however, was a greater interest in Japanese culture, and that is when I decided to learn Japanese and spend a summer in Japan.

In summer 2014, when I landed in Kyoto, I was shocked. I think you probably know the overwhelming language, or culture, shock as in *Lost in Translation*? That did not happen for me. In fact, I was shocked that Japanese society felt so familiar, that it’s actually my second time when know I’m not in China. The first time is Harvard, by the way. Looking around, all the Japanese kanji written language I saw were so similar to Chinese, that I could basically read 70% of them without any help.

And then, I found my host mom at the airport. She also recognized me, walked up, smiled, politely bowed to me, and we just stood there, silent. At this moment which seemed to last forever, all my imagination about an enemy and a mysterious nation manifested itself into one single Japanese woman, standing right in front of me. I could almost feel the heavy burden of history dragging us apart from each other. But then, my Japanese host mom said something I would never forget:

“Konnichiwa (the Japanese for hello), let’s talk.”

Suddenly the mysterious ‘enemy’ mask of Japan had vanished. What was exposed to me was a civilization with its own unique people, history and culture. It was when we happily talked about how Nanjing and Kyoto are so similar to each other, eating homemade ramen on a traditional Japanese tatami when I finally realized that it is not history that draws the line between friend and enemy, but bias and misunderstanding.

Is there a peaceful future between China and Japan? I don't know. But what I do know is that in my story, bias and misunderstanding didn't help. It is only when I got out of my biased echo chamber, and truly respect other cultures did I get rid of my imagination of the "other" as an enemy. So, next time when I hear "someone is not a friend", I'll think twice. It takes just a little bit of interest and a willing heart to communicate to break down the walls we built out of misunderstanding. Just like my host mom, I would happily say, "Konnichiwa, let's talk."