

# Finding Meaning and Innovation Abroad

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*Japan, an island country, was where I had decided to study abroad during my second year of university. Having been to the country a few times before and enjoyed the memories thoroughly, I had great incentive to spend a few months in Japan. I had known Japan was advanced in technology, especially in railway systems and robotics, but it was only until recently that I had discovered a term, known as ikigai, that translated to one's purpose in life. It was intriguing, and as I went deeper into the subject, I realized how much the struggles of finding my own ikigai applied to me. While studying computer science at university, I had forgotten why I enjoyed being immersed in technology, or why I had chosen to take the path. The admiration I once had for the field was turning into fear and doubt, and before I knew it, I was escaping to Japan. There was the fact that the concept of ikigai had brought me there, so I could observe and learn firsthand the way people lived their lives, but the other part was I desired to see technology as a part of my life once again. Potentially, I aspired to see how technology can tie into happiness, and how I could find my own ikigai. Although I had travelled to Japan before, there were many aspects that came across as surprising or new to me, and it made me realize how little I know of ikigai, technology, and Japan.*

*Originally, I had arrived in Japan with an open mindset, but it became easy to pick up patterns and notice the surroundings that I had been oblivious to. A tourist is only able to see the facade of a country and its people, but after living a few months, I began to see how several people appeared happy, but weren't. It made me realize that because of the culture of working constantly and trying to fit in a mold, a lot of people had forgotten themselves in the process, and were just getting by. Although I didn't find my ikigai, or my calling in Japan, I learned that I didn't need to rush and have everything figured out. The experience helped me appreciate the field I hoped to one day get into, while also teaching me to live in the present moment. I was in awe of the beauty of Japan once more, but this time, I was aware of the many layers that made the country what it is, and whilst also learning how technology is impacting people, and how it will continue to do so in the future.*

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I studied abroad in Kobe, Japan, during the Spring semester of 2020 as a sophomore student. During the time I studied abroad, I was re-evaluating my major and interests, and was trying to find my passion in the field of technology again. I worked back and forth on the paper, from the proposal to publication for almost two years, and it was a difficult process as this was my first independent research study. I am a senior now, and I have learned not only about the research process, but also have regained my passion for computing technology and learned to balance my happiness with my ikigai.

## Overview of Ikigai in Japan

Japan, a nation deeply rooted in its traditions and history, incorporates these traditions into everyday life. While it is a country commonly seen to have a pleasant and inviting presence to tourists and outsiders, it can be startling to discover the developing, unstable layers of the country. While one might imagine that economic stability and emotional well-being go hand in hand, it is not always the case. Even in a prosperous nation, people can be unhappy or living their lives in a state of indifference. Due to this mindset, a concept, *ikigai*, was formed. Mathews (1996) explains, “*ikigai*, broadly defined as ‘that which most makes one’s life seem worth living,’ most often expressed as family, work, or personal dream” (p. 718). Although *ikigai* can be seen as a splendid way of finding meaning and reason in one’s life, it can also be a destroying factor, as many people attempt to achieve such a purpose, but never feel true fulfillment. This concept can give a plausible explanation to the layers behind the people of Japan.

## Prosperity and Well-being

It can be strenuous to work faithfully towards one’s desire only to fall short of expectations. To this day, this work-centered mentality is seen as one of the major social issues in Japan (Mathews, 1996). It was found that a materialist lifestyle or standard of living can have little to do with the well-being of people. A theory called the “Eastern paradox” explains that “there is no link between the level of economic development of a society and the overall happiness of its members” (Stevenson and Wolfers, 2008, p. 1). This brings to an understanding that happiness and *ikigai* can be correlated to economic success and wealth to only a certain extent. While the country appears to be faring well regarding employment, the happiness levels seem to be on a decline (Hetter, 2020).

It gives off an image that even though there is peace and financial stability in the country, there is a lack of peace and harmony within the people. For instance, this can be demonstrated by the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997 which resulted in a change in Japan’s work/life balance (Kondo and Oh, 2010). Due to the crisis, many people were unemployed, and suffered psychological illnesses, such as depression, while others had to work outrageous hours. The latter became more frequent over the years, causing high levels of stress and leading to “*karoshi*” or “death from overwork,” and high suicide rates (Kondo and Oh, 2010). The Japanese people were unable to request vacations or lighter workload as it went against their idea of working as a collectivist society (Odin, 1994). This mentality of overworking is correlated to *ikigai*, as people feel the need to reach their goal or purpose in life by working to their breaking point. There are several

factors that may contribute to this, including the history and culture of Japan.

## History of Japan

Japan has previously been isolated from other countries, being closed to trade, travel, and ideas. During the Tokugawa period, from 1603 to 1868, the Edo Bakufu feudal military government enforced a policy of national isolation known as “*sakoku*,” which translates to “closed country” (Walker, 1996, p. 169). This was done to prevent new ideas entering, as it was claimed that Japan was traditionally influenced by other countries. However, trade was still pursued with the Dutch and Chinese. It was not until 1853 that US Navy Commodore Matthew Perry sailed into Tokyo Harbor and demanded the people of Japan end their isolation and permit trade with the U.S. Japan, having been in isolation for decades with no weaponry to defend itself, yielded to their demands (Asia for Educators, 2009). The re-opening of Japan’s borders was a major turning point as it allowed not only for foreign influences to enter, but also for other countries to learn their distinct culture. As trade began, so did the spreading of ideas, thoughts, and beliefs (Asia for Educators, 2009).

## Background on Japanese Culture

In various ways, the society and culture of this group of islands sticks out as peculiar. The Japanese self is observed and identified as social, group-centered, and collectivist, differing from more Western traits such as egocentrism and individualism (Odin, 1994). Due to this image, in Japan it is preferred to act according to what is best for the community and society, rather than what is desired for oneself. This leads to lack of communication and acknowledgement of true thoughts and feelings.

This lack of communication leads to two words in Japanese: “*Honne*” and “*Tatemae*,” which translate to “true thoughts” and “public facade” (Nakata, 2014). Rather than confiding and resolving issues, people rather take the indirect approach to appear polite and keep harmony within a group of people or a community. It is even considered proper social etiquette, rather than something negative, to keep true intentions hidden, taking the indirect approach and avoiding conflict in the process. Although this works well in a community setting, and can be seen as admirable and selfless, it can be unhealthy on an individual level as people are encouraged to avoid direct communication. While Japan grows steadily as a powerful, first-world country, layers of solitude and uneasiness continue to exist in the lives of the people. However, with more cultural and international exchange, it seems that a steady process is underway as younger generations learn more about different cultures and their approaches, and likewise, foreigners understand the roots of a unique, isolated culture (Shoshkes, 2006, p. 160).

## Growth and Change

Over the past several years, Japan has grown more welcoming, opening their physical and mental borders to the rest of the world. With the steady globalization of the world economy, it seems that Japan is taking steps to contribute to become a massive, growing empire. Along with their economic success, achievements in other fields also increase. Before the Edo period, Japan was influenced mainly by China, as is evident in one of their writing styles, Kanji, adopted from Chinese characters and still used in the current era (Tsutsumi, 2017). During the Edo period, the nation was able to develop their own distinct culture, but years after reopening they welcome all aspects of Western culture, including ideas, art, lifestyle, food and words (Tsutsumi, 2017). Along with welcoming new ideas, they are also increasing efforts to expand their culture and beliefs with the rest of the world, allowing foreign countries to see a different part of Japan. With this new perspective, it may seem that Japan is adapting as a new global power, and will potentially be open to welcoming more individualistic characteristics and traits to align with their unique collectivist lifestyle. Along with their efforts to become international, they are also growing as a technologically advanced nation.

### An Innovative Environment

Along with an evolving cultural lifestyle, development in technology-related factors are also increasing, especially in railway systems, artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and considerations of the future. While countries such as the United States of America and the People's Republic of China are rising with powerful technology, Japan is not far behind. The country's deep history is rooted in more fields in the traditional arts, such as traditional dance, tea ceremony "chanoyu," and Japanese flower arranging "ikebana" (Stalker, 2018). Ikebana, for example, was seen as a crucial skill for future brides and homemakers prior to World War II, however, after the war, women in particular picked up more Western culture and pursued more fields such as education and teaching (Stalker, 2018). Japan has advanced from a culture rooted in tradition to a nation of innovation and creation. It can be said that some of this steady development has been contributed to by a long history of restoration and transformation (Gibney, 2000). Despite the traumatic history of the nation's prolonged isolation period followed by influences of war, the people of Japan have been able to rise from their past and rebuild the country into one with a more prosperous, rewarding future.

One example innovation combines the beauty of art with the advancement of technology to create a surreal digital art museum. TeamLab Borderless and teamLab Planets: digital art museums were founded in Japan and have expanded to other

countries in Asia, including China and Singapore (teamLab, 2020). A permanent virtual art gallery located in Odaiba, Tokyo, teamLab Borderless consists of artworks flowing and traveling within rooms, around people, combining and interacting with other artwork, all the while having no boundaries. Whilst teamLab Planets, a temporary virtual art gallery located in Toyosu, Tokyo, scheduled to operate until late 2022, is a place where a person immerses themselves with the artwork, and experiences no boundaries between oneself and the world. The museums offer a magical experience that gives a new depth to how art and technology go hand in hand to create something that could not be fathomed previously.

### Growth of Artificial Intelligence

A leader in artificial intelligence and virtual reality, Japan is a technology hotspot for development in robotics, cyber celebrities, and virtual gaming. Artificial Intelligence (AI) has become a controversial topic in the past several decades, distrusted for attempting to create computers that replicated human intelligence and is sometimes considered unethical (Bolter, 1984). However, though controversy still exists, it has become more respectable and numerous programmers have dedicated their work lives to attempting to replicate a human mind in the form of a computer. AI has great potential to be omni-use, meaning it can potentially apply to all areas of life (Franke, 2019). Artificial intelligence is thus considered an intriguing combination of philosophy, logic, and technology, also known as "philosophical engineering." This field is mainly concerned with logicians translating mathematical problems into programmed solutions, and computer scientists understanding and programming human knowledge to be understood by machines (Bolter, 1984). In recent years, Japan has opened a new mentality to artificial intelligence, rather than seeing it as an unethical creation, they are striving to develop robots capable of "deep learning," which is a branch of machine learning where, via experience, large amounts of data can be learned by an algorithm (Harvard Business Review, 2020). The programmers are determined that powerful AI technology and robotics can be the solution to several social and industrial problems in the 21st century.

### Development of Society 5.0

Japan is expanding their boundaries with technology, and attempting to create not only an advanced environment with the latest appliances, but also use the knowledge to create better, healthier, and easier lives for its people. One of Japan's current projects involves developing a fifth stage of human development and evolution, known as Society 5.0. The concept of Society 5.0 was proposed as a future society, the fifth stage in

human evolution after the hunter-gather, agrarian, industrial and information society stages. The fifth stage will incorporate the technologies of the information society revolution in order to resolve social, environmental and energy issues (JapanGov).

As discussed previously, a major cause of unhappiness in Japan is extreme pressures from work and being able to meet an individual quota for the success of a collectivist society. Well aware of the reason for Japan's low happiness levels and high suicide rates, despite prosperity, Society 5.0 has plans to develop a better work/life balance. With the growth of AI and robots, the intense workload will lessen (JapanGov). This will allow people to spend less time completing tedious everyday tasks, and more time controlling the operations that are to be done by the robots. While operating robots and AI to complete tasks will be an occupation, workers will have less pressure from work, resulting in better mental health. With the potential future success of Society 5.0, technology may be the way to bring happiness and ikigai back into the lives of the Japanese people.

The innovations that have been implemented in society include Internet of Things (IoT), Artificial Intelligence (AI), robots, Big Data, and sharing economy to name a few, and Japan aspires to incorporate them into the industrial and social life of the people (JapanGov). The country benefits from an abundance of real and usable “raw” data from universal health care and several manufacturing facilities, and Japan's advanced technology from excellence in manufacturing “monozukuri” (JapanGov). Japan plans on solving social issues such as healthcare in the aging population by implementing remote medical care services, and using the assistance of AI and robots in medical facilities. Alongside healthcare, industrial environments will also be impacted such as introducing autonomous transportation in underpopulated areas and AI infrastructure developed to inspect and maintain roads, bridges, tunnels and so forth to create less of a financial burden even with a shortage of skilled workers.

With the push for the development of Society 5.0, innovation is being encouraged. Japan wants to be the first in establishing a nation that will lead the world with new technologies that will drastically improve the quality of life even, with a declining population (JapanGov). A part of their strategy includes encouraging all startups to share their creations and ideas to provide solutions to world problems. A development in the quality of life is striving to create Japan into a barrier-free nation, which includes allowing transportation to be accessible for people with physical disabilities, and the use of other sensory cues for people with visual or auditory impairment. Some innovative ideas include creating artificial intelligent robots to improve people's productivity; using cybernetic treatment technology to assist people with physical disabilities; and incorporating digital farming to make agriculture more sustainable to name a few. Japan will be striving to develop technology for the next society as well as improve the lives of its people.

## Conclusion

With the culture and technology expanding in Japan, the growing progress can be correlated to the concept of ikigai. Ikigai has been a major part of Japan's history, present, and may continue onto their future. As people feel the need to grow and expand themselves to reach a goal or purpose that must be fulfilled, Japan will have improvements and grow closer to their goal of establishing an environment which incorporates Society 5.0. That said, the idea of reaching ikigai has also been damaging as it has contributed to people overworking to exhaustion, and the rise in mental disorders such as depression. In recent years, there has been change in the Japanese culture to lessen the idea of always overworking, and support the idea of focusing more on happiness and well-being, but there might still be some time before people can separate ikigai and happiness.

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