

Regional Studies in Intercultural Communication : The American and Japanese Perception of Time

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As is well known, the study of cross-culture communication began around the time of the cold war due to increasing globalization. It was first initiated within private businesses to provide employees with training for developing international business relations in foreign countries. However, the precedence for training employees for overseas work was likely the Foreign Service Act of 1946, and the development of the Foreign Service Institute, for training American government employees for posts overseas. The purpose of these various programs was to provide training in understanding different cultures and how to behave effectively according to the cultural context. As such, cross-cultural communication developed as an interdisciplinary field incorporating aspects from the fields of anthropology, psychology, cultural studies, and communication. The main thrust of cross-cultural communication is how to communicate effectively for better intercultural and international understanding.

Cross-culture communication eventually developed blending into the field of intercultural communication, and often the terms are used interchangeably. However, if the field of cross-cultural communication is understood as a study of the methods for effective cross-cultural communication (how to communicate), then intercultural communication is a comparative study of the different strategies of communication among different cultures, as well as the study of how communication is performed across different cultures (how communication is performed).

Naturally, intercultural communication is not just an issue of language or word usage alone, but involves a larger constructional landscape of perception. For the purposes of this paper, I wish to address three categories of time perception that form a large part of the nonverbal aspect of intercultural communication, in particular the time perception of calendar, season, and holiday. In addition, to highlight how different perceptions of these three categories can affect intercultural communication, I will address them by comparing their conceptualization in Western (specifically American) and Japanese culture.

The Perception of Time (Calendar)		
欧米 AD 1868	日本 明治元年	中国(清時代) 同治7年
Christian Calendar AD 1868	Japan Meiji 1	China (Qing Dynasty) Tongzhi 7

The Perception of Time : Calendar

The conceptualization of time is extraordinary different between East and West (and other cultures as well), and not merely just an issue of whether one is punctual or not. These differences have broad cultural implications that are often glossed or completely ignored to the benefit of the dominant Christian culture of the West. As a case in point, currently it is popular to use the designations CE and BCE for BC and AD. Nevertheless, whichever designation is used, the year signified is the same in both cases. The year 551 BCE is the same year as 551 BC, and 570 CE is the same year as AD 570. Both denote the Christian calendar, so what compelled the change in terminology?

The initials AD stand for Anno Domini (in the year of our lord), which is again short for Anno Domini Nostri Iesu Christi (in the year of our lord Jesus Christ.” The initials BC stand for Before Christ. The year Christ was born is designated as the first year of our lord, which forms the first year of the Christian calendar.¹ The years Before Christ are counted backwards from AD 1, starting with 1 BC, and there is no zero year in this system. CE stands for Common Era and BCE (also sometimes abbreviated as BC) stands for Before Common Era.

However, this is not the calendar common to all cultures, but rather the calendar now used as the international standard. For example, the Meiji Restoration, when the Japanese government changed from a feudal bureaucracy to a modern democracy, occurred in the first year of the Meiji era according to the Japanese calendar, in the seventh year of Tongzhi according to the Chinese calendar, and in AD 1868 (1868 CE) according to the Christian calendar. Many other cultures also have their own calendar, such as the Hebrew calendar. While I do not know personally how commonly the traditional Hebrew calendar is still used in Jewish cultural communities at present, the Japanese calendar is still in common use in Japan. We are now in the 24 th year of the Heisei era according to the Japanese calendar (AD 2012 or 2012 CE), and official forms in Japan quite often require the year of birth written according to the Japanese calendar—something all foreigners in Japan must learn if they are going to live in Japan for any length of time.

The “Common Era” notation became current in the late twentieth century in the United States, initially used primarily in academia, following the model introduced by Jewish academics a century earlier. This notation system is ostensibly an attempt to be cultural sensitive to those of other cultures by avoiding reference to Jesus or Christ,² but which in the end only serves to obfuscate the Christian origins of the calendar that has become the global standard due to the dominance of Christian culture at this time.³

The use of the “Common Era” notation has also become an issue in the “cultural war” now raging in the United States. The “cultural war” in the United States is at present basically a struggle for cultural domination between the “traditionalist” or “conservative” proponents who are dedicated to preserving the white Anglo-Saxon cultural basis of the United States and the “progressive” or “liberal” proponents of who are dedicated to recognizing and making provision for the multicultural reality of the current citizens of the country. The former proponents regard the “Common

Era” notation as another attempt to erase Christianity from the American cultural landscape, and the later proponents regard it as a way to minimize offense to those of other religions, beliefs, or ideologies.⁴

As a slight digression, whatever one’s thoughts may be on the “BC-AD” or “Common Era” notation issue, it is almost impossible to extricate Christian vocabulary from the English language. Such common terms as “God bless you” when you sneeze or even “good bye,” which means “May God be with you,” are such basic components of everyday speech, that the etymology of the meaning is seldom consciously considered.

In any case, the issue of whether to use the “BC-AD” or the “Common Era” notation is just one example of how different cultural constructs of time and its denotation can have real effects in the current political landscape as we live it today.

The Perception of Time (Season)	
Japanese Poetic Names for the Months	
1. Mutsuki (睦月)	7. Fuzuki (文月)
2. Kisaragi (如月)	8. Hazuki (葉月)
3. Yayoi (弥生)	9. Nagatsuki (長月)
4. Uzuki (卯月)	10. Kannazuki (神無月)
5. Satsuki (皐月)	11. Shimotsuki (霜月)
6. Minazuki (水無月)	12. Shiwasu (師走)

The Perception of Time : Season

The conceptualization of the seasons is also cultural specific. Not only are the Japanese people in general proprietary about having four seasons, but as one example cherry blossoms are associated with the new school year which begins in April, whereas autumn is associated with the new school year in the United States which begins in September. Similar to the culture war in the United States concerning the “BC-AD” and “Common Era” nomination, it is now in Japan a minor political issue whether the Japanese school year should be changed to start in September to conform with schools in the West.⁵

The proponents of the argument to change the beginning of the school year to fall contend that this change would make it easier for Japanese students to study abroad for a year if the Japanese school year was in alignment with that of the West, and increase the internationalization or globalism of Japan.

The traditionalists maintain that Japan should adhere to its traditions and not pander to the Western countries or Western tradition. This contention also relates to one of the more basic issues between the progressive and conservative factions on whether and to what extent Japan needs to promote internationalization or globalization, and the possible merits and demerits of the affects on Japan with further internationalization of the country.

Japanese are typically much taken with their concept of the four seasons and often believe it is unique to Japan, whereas as Americans tend to assume that four seasons are the norm. Foreigners to Japan will quickly become exasperated with being asked if their country has four seasons. If told it is actually a rare country that does not have four seasons, then the next question may well be “but are they the same four seasons?” What on earth prompted this national possessiveness about season, and how does it relate to the larger picture of Japanese culture and communication? I am inclined to ascribe it to wartime propaganda on the uniqueness of Japan, but perhaps there is actually more to it than that.

Certainly there is a plethora of Japanese seasonal terms. These “season words,” called *kigo* (季語) in Japanese, are used in Japanese poetry. This term was coined in the early twentieth century and there are books called *saijiki* (歳時記), which are glossaries of seasonal words for haiku composers accompanied by illustrative verses. There are some five hundred essential seasonal terms, and some of the loveliest for spring include: the moon obscured by haze (*oborozuki* 朧月), first note of the bush warbler (*hatsune* 初音), light snow (*awayuki* 淡雪), and spring rain (*harusame* 春雨).

The word for season in Japanese is either *kisetsu* (季節) or *shiki* (四季); the former means “seasons and events” and the latter literally “four seasons.” While Japan is typically thought of as the land of four seasons, I would argue for fifty-two seasons since the weather changes incrementally during the year in Japan. Instead of all the flowers blooming more or less at once as in the English idiom “April showers bring May flowers,” in Japan each flower has its own distinct season, with the season moving leisurely along, and as reflected in the Japanese seasonal terms. Indeed, although not quite as extreme, for the purposes of poetry, each of the Japanese seasons is further divided into three periods, making for twelve seasonal periods in all. However, these twelve periods do not coincide with the months of the now standard Western calendar but rather with the months of the traditional solar-lunar calendar. These twelve periods can also be further divided to make twenty-four seasons in all.

However, the origins of this attention to season, and even the use of poetic seasonal terms, extends back to the influence of Chinese culture very early on in Japan. The “four seasons” and seasonal tropes are found in early Chinese paintings such as the painting of Maitreya’s Pure Land in cave 23 at Dunhuang which includes seasonal tropes such as “sowing fields in spring,” “ploughing in summer,” and “harvesting in autumn.” Likewise the imperial tomb of Yong Qing of Liao (ca. 1031) has murals of the four seasons depicted on its walls. Also compare the similar use of seasonal imagery in a poem by the Chinese poet Wang Wei (699–759) and a poem from the Japanese anthology the *Shūishū* (composed ca. 1005–1007):

Wang Wei

From the Blue River white stones project;
On the waters of jade a few reed leaves,
On the mountains paths no rain as yet,

But the air is moist and wets the clothes.⁶

Shūishū “Autumn” 210

When not yet morning,
And the mountains of Arashi
Were to be cold,
In crimson leaves of brocade
Would none be unadorned,

Even the tradition of inscribing seasonal poems on painting screens or creating poems inspired by such screens ultimately derives from China.

Wang Wei

”Words for the Mica Screen”

Unfold this screen
Against the light,
Show hills and streams
Nature painted.⁷

The debt Japanese poetry and seasonal allusion owe to early Chinese poets such as Wang Wei and Li Bai is now often forgotten, and claimed as something unique to Japan, but certainly it has had a lasting influence on Japanese culture, perhaps more so than in China. Likewise, traditional seasonal names remain an important part of Japanese culture with reverberations throughout the culture. Should one return to Japan early in the new year, one is asked did you make it back in time for “*mutsuki*”? *Mutsuki* (睦月) is the ancient name for New Year’s, referring both to the first day of the year (O-shōgatsu お正月) and January in general (*ichi-gatsu* 一月).

The Perception of Time (Holidays)	
US - Traditional Holidays	(五節句) Japan – Traditional Holidays
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• New Year’s (January 1st)• Easter (Solar-Lunar Calendar)• Memorial day (last Monday of May)• Independence Day (July 4th)• Labor Day (First Monday of September)• Halloween (October 31st)• Thanksgiving (fourth Thursday of November)• Christmas (December 25th)	<ol style="list-style-type: none">① Porridge Day (7th day of 1st month)② Doll’s Day (1st “snake day” of the 3rd month)③ Boy’s Day (1st “ox day” of the 5th month)④ Tanabata (7th day of the 7th month)⑤ Chrysanthemum Day (9th day of the 9th month)

The Perception of Time : Holiday

The Japanese concern for being home for New Year’s is quite similar to the American concern for being home for Christmas. In a typical American Christmas, the whole family gathers and, depending on tradition, Christmas presents are opened either on Christmas eve or Christmas morn-

ing. A faithful Christian family attends a special Christmas mass or service at a church. The mother or female relatives of the family prepare a gorgeous feast, typically turkey, which the family not only eats for Christmas dinner, but continues eating the turkey or dinner leftovers in different forms such as sandwiches for many days on end.

Likewise for Japanese New Year's, the whole family assembles. The mother or other female relatives together prepare a special New Year's repast, called *O-sechi* (お節) in Japanese, to be eaten for three days, and each of the dishes of this repast has a symbolic meaning for good tidings for the coming year. Similar to Christmas presents in America, small gifts of money wrapped in attractive envelopes are given to the children by the members of the extended family. The first temple or shrine visit of the New Year, called *hatsu-mōde* (初詣) in Japanese, is likewise an important aspect of the Japanese New Year's events.

Conversely, the American New Year's and the Japanese Christmas also have points in common. New Year's eve is typically celebrated in America at home or at a party, and on the east coast the main event is watching the "Ball Drop" at Times Square in Manhattan at midnight either in person or by TV broadcast. For the young, rather than a family event, the celebration typically involves a large drinking party with friends, and it is of great importance to have a date for the party, whom one kisses at midnight and after which all sing *Auld Lang Syne* together.

Christmas is an imported holiday in Japan, and is a recent celebration that became common during the bubble years of the Japanese economy. If a couple has children, it is typically celebrated at home by the nuclear family and having Kentucky Fried Chicken and "Christmas cake" has practically become tradition in Japan.⁸ For the young singles, Japanese Christmas is like American New Year's in that it is a dating event, and often the chance for friends to solidify their relationship as a couple. Likewise, being home alone for Japanese Christmas without a date is culturally perceived as a lonely and depressing event.

However, due to the multiculturalism of the United States, Christmas itself is an issue. Christmas is obviously a Christian holiday as it celebrates the birth of Christ, and even "holiday" itself is of course a Christian term meaning "Holy Day." There are faithful Christians of many denominations who celebrate Christmas, and there are non-practicing Christians and those of other religions who also celebrate Christmas, but there are also those of other religions who resist the supremacy of the Christian holiday in American culture.

There are actually a number of different responses to the Christian holiday by those of other cultures. The Jewish holiday of Hanukkah generally falls around the same time as Christmas, between late November and late December depending on the traditional Hebrew calendar. In addition to kindling the lights of the Menorah candelabrum for this holiday, recently a new tradition of having a "Hanukkah tree" has been added, and often Hanukkah presents are exchanged, in addition to or instead of the traditional gifts of money distributed to children. The African-American

holiday of Kwanzaa, which takes place just after Christmas, was created in 1966 as a specifically African-American holiday by Maulana Karenga, but is now often celebrated in conjunction with Christmas and New Year's and not necessarily solely by African-Americans. Similar to the practice of using the "common era" notation to be sensitive to those of other cultures, the term for the seasonal holiday "Christmas" has been replaced with "Winter Holidays," and the "Merry Christmas" or "Happy New Year's" message on gift cards has been supplanted with the option of "Seasons Greetings."

As has been often noted, Japanese culture from the earliest historic period readily adopts, adapts, incorporates, and then internalizes influences from foreign cultures. Christmas is ultimately a Christian holiday celebrated radically differently in Japan than the West. The first temple or shrine visit of the year is typically made to a Shinto shrine, but can also be made to a Buddhist temple, or even a Confucian shrine. Another common Japanese New Year's event is to make a circuit of the "Seven Lucky Gods" for good luck in the coming year. The "Seven Lucky Gods" is an amalgam of individual deities from different religious systems imported to Japan from China, and then formed into a group in Japan in the early modern period.

The identity of the Japanese people is not based on religion, but rather on the Japanese culture itself. A personal friend of mine went to England a number of years back, and was asked on the street by a stranger if he was Moslem, probably because he sports a goatee. His answer was that he was Japanese, and the stranger then said, "but are you Moslem?" Here is a good example of how cultural background affects communication. To the stranger, whether my friend was Japanese or not was irrelevant to the question and did not serve as an answer, but to my friend it was the appropriate response to the question. Another friend, who is British, listening in on the conversation, remarked that to the Japanese, Japanese is a religion. However, if Moslem or Christian or Judaism is not perceived as a religion but rather as a culture, both the stranger's question (basically, are you one of us) and my friend's answer (I am Japanese) make perfect sense. Hence in the United States the "cultural war" concerns preserving (or not) the traditional Christian culture, whereas in Japan the issue is about preserving traditional Japanese culture. Both address basically the same issue, just couched in different terms.

There are several other aspects of the construct of time that are likewise cultural specific. The Western concept of the progression of time is typically linear, whereas the Asian concept influenced by Hindu philosophy and Buddhism is typically cyclic; the hours of the day are now on internationally standardized length of time, however until the Meiji period in Japan the length of the hours of the day were incrementally adjusted during the year to match the length of daylight as it changed throughout the year; the seven day week is also now an international standard, but the names of the days of the week are specific to and based on the historical and cultural background of individual culture. All of these aspects deserve equally lengthy explanation in the different modes of conceptualization and how that affects communication across different cultures, but which will need to be addressed at a later time.

- 1 It is actually more complicated than that, originally the beginning of the “year of our lord 1” was calculated to begin with the conception of Christ. Also, that the date of birth, let alone the conception, of Christ is a point of contention is not really relevant to this discussion.
- 2 Irvin, Dale T.; Sunquist, Scott (2001). *History of the World Christian Movement*. Continuum International Publishing Group. p. xi: “The terms are meant, in deference to non-Christians, to soften the explicit theological claims made by the older Latin terminology, while at the same time providing continuity with earlier generations of mostly western Christian historical research.”
- 3 Delaney, Carol Lowery (2004) *Investigating Culture: An Experiential Introduction to Anthropology*. Blackwell Publishing, p.86: “I find CE a euphemism because the common era still begins with Christ’s birth and, thus, conceals the political implications.” Panikkar, Raimon (2004) *Christophany: The Fullness of Man*. Maryville, NY: Orbis Books, p.173: “In certain North American academic circles one can see a return—with repercussions elsewhere—to the most bigoted Christian colonialism, along with the good intention of overcoming it. It has been suggested that the terminology of the Western calendar, Christian in origin, be replaced by one that presumably would be neutral and universal. It is understandable that some would protest the use of A.D. (anno Domini), but by eliminating B.C. (before Christ) and substituting B.C.E. (Before the Common Era) scholars betray the depths of the cultural impact of the historico-Christian event.
- 4 Heustis, Reer R, Jr. (9 September 2007). “Common Era and the culture war”. *RenewAmerica*. <http://www.renewamerica.com/columns/heustis/070909>. Retrieved 2012-01-22. “Powerful anti-Christian forces have so entrenched themselves in every aspect of American culture, that it is nearly impossible for Christian families to engage in anything worthwhile without being barraged by relentless and malicious efforts to coronate King Diversity in place of the King of kings. Even our conventional calendar is a target of those who seek to erase the “Year of our Lord” from our societal memory.”
- 5 “Panel recommends Univ. of Tokyo to shift April enrollment to fall.” *Mainichi Japan* (January 18, 2012). <http://mdn.mainichi.jp/mdnnews/news/20120118p2g00m0dm148000c.html>. Retrieved 2012-01-23. “A panel at the University of Tokyo has proposed in an interim report that the leading Japanese university consider abolishing April enrollment for undergraduates and shift it to the fall to conform with the international norm... Fall enrollment would help facilitate acceptance of foreign students, as well as study abroad programs for the university’s own students. ... Education experts hope the move by the prestigious university will help generate a broad and lively discussion on the issue in Japan, which had previously been taken up by the government on several occasions but failed to gain momentum.”
- 6 Siren, Oswald. *Chinese Painting*, p.128.
- 7 “poetryintranslation” <http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Chinese/AllwaterWangWei.htm> Accessed 2012.01.23
- 8 “The KFC-Christmas connection in Japan.” *Japan Today* (Nov. 28, 2011). <http://www.japantoday.com/category/lifestyle/view/the-kfc-christmas-connection-in-japan> Retrieved 2102.01.23. “The tradition of eating KFC at Christmas dates back to the early 1970 s, when an expat customer at the chain’s Aoyama store observed that, in a land bereft of Yuletide turkey, fried chicken was the next best thing. The store’s canny manager was paying attention and passed word on to the higher-ups, leading the company to launch its ludicrously successful “Kurisumasu ni wa kentakkii!” (Kentucky for Christmas!) campaign in 1974. ... Or it might just be because Colonel Sanders in a Santa cap looks like Santa Claus.”