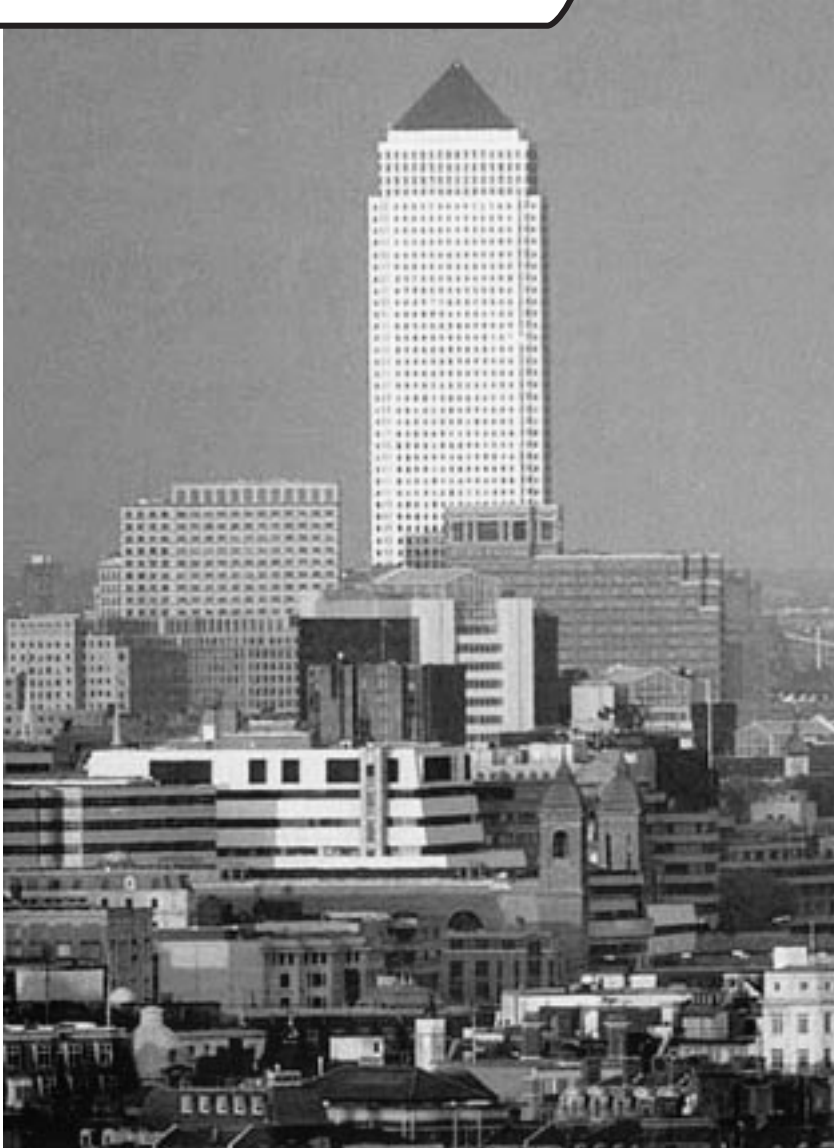


# CHAPTER 1

# *Then and Now*



*Canary Wharf in London. This building symbolises the rapid growth of London as a financial centre under Mrs Thatcher in the 1980s.*

I first came to Japan in 1980. Probably at that time most of the students who will read this book had not yet been born. I myself was a person very different to the person I am today. Not only was I much younger, but also I knew almost nothing  
5 about Japan. Although I had been interested in Japanese literature since I was a teenager, I had chosen to study English literature at university. Thus, when I first arrived in Japan, I did not know a word of Japanese and I knew very little about Japanese history or society. Like many foreigners, the general  
10 image of Japan which I had before I actually came here was a somewhat confused one. I thought of it both as a traditional ‘Oriental’ society, where people wrote haiku and practised the tea ceremony, and as a modern industrialised society, suffering from pollution and over-crowded cities.

15 Two things surprised me when I came to Japan. The first was that Japan was much more open to Western influence than I had imagined. Not only were Japanese making important contributions to the development of science and technology, but they also loved many aspects of Western culture—literature,  
20 music, art, cinema and so on. Indeed the average Japanese student seemed to me to know as much about traditional Western culture as the average British student—sometimes more! The second thing which surprised me, and which was connected to the first, was the sheer variety of Japan and  
25 Japanese people. Like many Europeans I had developed an image of Japanese people as being all very similar to one another. In fact, I found that people not only live widely different lives, but that they often have very different interests. One person’s hobby might indeed be composing haiku or per-  
30 forming the tea ceremony; another person, even in the same

family, might study oil-painting or choral singing.

Thus, depending on one's point of view, Japan can look very traditional or very modern—or even post-modern. As time passed, however, I came to see that, beneath this great variety, there were indeed certain common ways of thinking and feeling<sup>5</sup> which tended to be shared by most, if not all, Japanese people, whatever their particular interests or lifestyle. Diligence, perseverance, loyalty, sensitivity to the feelings of others—it is these values and others like them which really constitute Japanese culture and which have persisted over time, despite changes in<sup>10</sup> fashion, diet, entertainment and so on. At the same time, I came to see that these values, while they sometimes overlapped with the values of British people, were in many cases rather different from the ways of thinking and feeling with which I had grown up. In this book I will mainly be writing about the<sup>15</sup> differences between typical British and Japanese values, and the ways in which these differences are reflected in different aspects of British and Japanese life.

At the same time, however, I certainly do not think that the values of a people or a culture are permanent or unchang-<sup>20</sup> ing. Just as an individual through time changes and develops, so too, in my opinion, do cultures. Naturally each of us is deeply influenced by our own particular family or education, but we are not determined by them. When we grow up, we make our own choices and decisions. In the same way, countries also<sup>25</sup> change as they encounter new influences and situations. It is obvious that Japan has changed very profoundly over the past 150 years. Indeed it has changed, in some ways quite dramatically, in the twenty years since I first came. This is partly because it is in the nature of modern societies continually to<sup>30</sup>

change and innovate. When I first came to Japan there were no word processors, personal computers, fax machines, Internet or portable telephones. Japan had only recently emerged as the world's second largest economy, and there was a widespread  
5 sense of self-confidence and optimism. Japan seemed to be growing richer and richer, and this economic growth in turn led to new problems such as globalisation or the 'hollowing-out' of industry. The yen rose and rose in value so that each time I returned to Britain, I felt wealthier than before. Then, of  
10 course, the bubble burst and we entered the period of economic uncertainty in which we still remain. Many of the features of Japanese society about which people had been most confident started to be questioned and changed.

Britain too has changed profoundly in the last twenty years.  
15 When I first left, Mrs Thatcher had just become Prime Minister and Britain had entered a very difficult period of economic restructuring and social change. Many reforms, some of them profound, were introduced in British institutions and laws. Generally, in contrast to Japan, the atmosphere was pessimistic and  
20 bleak, with many people uncertain about the future. Only recently, with the election of Tony Blair's new Labour government has the atmosphere changed and become more optimistic.

In many ways, it could be argued, Britain and Japan are becoming more similar. Both are faced by the challenges of new  
25 and difficult economic circumstances and both countries are doing their best to adjust to new circumstances. In this situation, while it is important to value what is good in the past, it is also very important to be able to learn from the experiences of other people in other countries. I hope that people will read  
30 this book in that spirit.