Introduction

Living in Japan for many years, I feel that I see more and more meanings and contradictions in Japan, and what I see makes me want to write. In my years in Japan teaching, writing, agonizing through the earthquake, and witnessing the economic downturn, political protests, attitude shifts and odd westernizations, I always feel like writing about my experience.

In some ways, Japan is built from words, so using words, organized into essays, can help to make sense of my experience of Japan. My experience might be the starting point for these essays, but each essay is an attempt to understand much more than my own experience. "Essay" in French originally meant "to try," and that is what I want to do in these essays, try to make sense of what I see and what happens to me.

The famous writer Henry James said that there was only one rule for writing well: "Only connect." That is, writing is a kind of connecting. I agree with that. As a writer and a teacher, I know connecting is the basis of learning and education. Ideas connect to people. People connect one idea to another idea. People connect to people, and the cycle of connecting grows. Connecting is essential for education, and essential for life.

For me, Japan has never completely normalized. There is always a little disconnection. I realize now that though I am very much in Japan, I will never quite be of Japan. I live here, but I am from another place. But that is a good position to write from—and in Japan maybe the only position to write from. The search for how and where I fit in—where I connect—and how I often do not fit in, gives me topics to think and write about.

These days, Japan is put into visuals—photographs, videos, anime, TV programs and films. I think that just looking at Japan is not enough. It is important to use words to help understand. Even visiting or living here is not enough. We have to think in words to really understand. Sometimes, video stops us from seeing, while words can make us see much better.

As the Zen Buddhists say, the finger pointing at the moon is not the moon. The essay pointing at Japan is not Japan. But then again, a finger or two pointed towards Japan can make everyone see more, think more and experience the world more deeply. That means taking joy in the differences, the similarities and everything in between. That means finding the deeper meanings.

E.M. Forster said, "How do I know what I think until I see what I say?" But for me in Japan, I always wonder: How do I know what I see until I read what I wrote about what I saw?

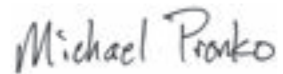
As an American who has made Japan home, I am used to confusion, of course, but then again, maybe "home" is a confusing word no matter where you live, no matter what culture, country or experience of life envelops you.

Of course, this is a textbook, and you will learn authentic English, but it is the process of reacting to the world and trying to explain my personal reactions that I hope you will learn from, too. That is an active process of learning how to see and learning how to express what you see.

As you read and think, you will start to get a sense of how you, too, can be both inbound and outbound. Inbound means paying attention, observing, reacting and feeling. Outbound means

getting the courage to do something with English. Both of those are active processes and they are modeled in this textbook with the aim of you students doing something similar, in your own unique way.

Enjoy the journey in both directions!



Michael Pronko

Unit 01

What's in a Name?

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Walking back to the station after a party with my senior seminar students one evening, one of them suddenly turned to me with a serious look on her face and asked, "Can I ask you a personal question?" "Of course," I said. "What should I call you exactly?" My first answer was going to be, "Call me Michael." Americans love to be called by their first names. The great American novel, *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville, starts out with the famous line, "Call me Ishmael." In America, a first name is part of your self-definition, a peg to hang your identity on. In Japan, though, it is just not that simple.

All teachers are called *sensei*, a term of respect that establishes a clear social relation in a distinct hierarchy with clear expectations and obligations. As a *sensei*, I have duties to dispense, knowledge to pass on, and advice to hand out: in short, a well-de-

fined role. Moving from "*sensei*" to "Michael" moves from the social to the personal, from the role to the person, a distance that in Japan is wider than in America.

Outside of school, what I am called does not always correspond to the precise formal terms of address Japanese use. The Japanese system of names and titles devolves into a puzzling jumble of inconsistencies with foreign names. On any given day, I might be addressed by any of the following: Michael, Pronko, Pronko *san*, Pronko *sensei*, Michael *san*, or Michael *sensei*. Each one indicates different degrees of intimacy and levels of social position, different levels of confusion. I have adjusted to living in Japan much better than my name has.

Japanese would always have *san* attached to their family name like *Suzuki san*. But the different foreign name order and often-unclear status means I have to be ready to answer to anything. At some restaurants I frequent, the master calls me "Michael *san*," but at others "Pronko *san*." However, sometimes it is the polite, formal master who uses the more informal "Michael *san*."

Anyone from the *takkyubin* home deliveryman to the department store service counter to the city office workers might call me "Michael *san*," too, just because Michael is in the front, left, spot where Japanese family names usually go. I can never tell if the person is confused about my family name, or trying to act westernized, or just feeling close.

On the other hand, the young chef at a small French bistro I sometimes eat at, who always gives me a casual French hug when I leave, uses the more formal "Pronko *san*." I guess the casual hug and formal address go together in a mismatched Japanese way.

Some colleagues at university call me, "Pronko *sensei*"; others, "Michael *sensei*"; others, "Michael," but with no connection

to our relative age, closeness or protocol. One colleague I often go for a drink with still calls me, "Pronko *sensei*." Only now, as our friendship has deepened, it sounds ironic and joking. Switching now would involve an awkward negotiation. It is easier to leave it as it is.

When speaking English, colleagues will sometimes refer to other colleagues by their first name, which makes me wonder: are they actually close or just using first names to fit the English culture usage? To switch from family name to given name means switching an entire system of naming from one culture to the next, or to suddenly move several layers of intimacy closer. As with so many things in Japan, it is impossible to know.

My name almost never fits easily into application forms, forcing me to adapt and bend my name. At one point, I had three different point cards for Yodobashi Camera, each with a different variation of my name. I'd forget the card and get a new one. A clerk would not let me combine the points, assuming I was three different people at the same address until I sat down with a manager and explained.

It was my fault for filling in the application form a different way each time, writing my name in the American order once, the Japanese order (family name first) once, and in *katakana* instead of *romaji* once. I tried to include my middle name, too, which does not fit in anywhere. "Which name is correct?" the manager demanded, but it was hard to say exactly. In Japan, I seem to have a rotating collection of names.

This tangled system of names will only get more perplexing as Japan internationalizes. One of my students who worked for a joint venture firm called her British boss, "Martin" but her Japanese boss, "Sato *shacho*." The name systems cannot merge, but

they can coexist.

Japanese like to stay inside their work titles, and reserve their first name for spouses, close friends or lovers. To become close enough to use someone's first name in Japanese is a powerful, moving moment. In English, your given name is used so often, it could never carry such intense intimacy.

Nowadays, I use my first name more and more, with students, colleagues and even when I make a reservation at a restaurant. It is not closeness I want, but rather a bit of consistency. In Japan, anyway, no one is going to correct what you call yourself, so like in some online avatar game, you can call yourself whatever you want.

I Using the keywords

In the blanks, put the most suitable word from the essay. More than one word might work, but choose the one that best fits.

1. If you can understand the social ____________, you can see what position everyone is in compared to everyone else.
2. The names and the titles do not match exactly. There are just too many ____________.
3. Those two friends have known each other for many years, developing ____________ to talk about everything with trust.
4. To get the scholarship, I had to fill in many, many ____________ forms, with every piece of information about myself.
5. In order to make a peaceful and functional society, many different kinds of people have to learn to ____________.

II Comprehending the essay

Review the essay and find the answers to these questions.

1. What kind of problems did the writer find with his foreign name in Japan?

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2. What is the difference between names in the west and names in Japan?

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3. What kind of naming problem does he have at his university?

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4. What kind of problems does he have with application forms?

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5. What different meanings does a first name have in Japan compared to the west?

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6. What does the writer wonder will happen as Japan interna-

tionalizes?

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III Summarizing the essay

By reusing your answers to the comprehension questions, write a short summary of the essay in your own words.

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IV Discussing ideas and opinions

Think about your opinion on each of these questions and discuss with other students in groups.

1. What names or ways of calling people show intimacy and close relationships?
2. Should Japanese names be written in western style or in traditional style in the future?
3. Which is better, using first names more or keeping exact titles with family names?