

Graduation Ceremony



For beautiful flowers to bloom, those same flowers must one day wilt and wither away. Some might even say that if they didn't do so, they couldn't have been beautiful. In other words, for everything there's an end, and something can only have any meaning because of this. Experiencing Japan's seasons, culture, or aphorisms for long enough will certainly leave you aware of this ideal. For one's high school life, what makes its ending concrete is the graduation ceremony. Each graduate's self as a high schooler has become a flower, and here it wilts, turning to petals and floating away in the wind down everyone's separate paths. And this year, among these flowers whose growth I've watched for three years, I'll be in the mix drifting away too.

More than anything else, Japan's graduation ceremonies are solemn. At the rehearsal, graduates must practice countless times the timing and angle of their bows, how they walk, how they stand on stage, and how loud they respond with "hai" (yes) when their names are called. The first time I watched a graduation ceremony here I counted, and aside from the class representative, graduates had to stand 12 times and bow 20 times, so it's useful practice. But while the fruits of that practice can be during the graduation proper, the focus placed on each action means that the air of the gymnasium is heavy with a nervous tension.

Yet what truly makes you feel like that tension is bearing down on your body is the silence. Until the graduates walk out to a final sendoff, for the most part, there's little outside noise, cheering, or applause, and each part of the ceremony is

simply carried out, with solemnity and finality. Each speech looks back on high school life or wishes graduates the best in the future, but is delivered in an almost detached manner, with few surprises. When the diplomas are presented to a class representative, there's only the sound of the students' names being called and their "hai" in response, one by one, almost like a clock rhythmically ticking away in an empty room. And even though everyone singing the national anthem, school song, and graduation song together inspires a moving sense of togetherness, they're still sung with a lingering heaviness.

While steeping in this tense, thick air, everyone is thinking, I can't move an inch, I can't make a sound, so it can be exhausting even if you're just watching. But I do think, for an ending as momentous as this, the solemnity and melancholiness are appropriate. And when the graduates finally walk out, they're cheered on with applause loud and long, and the tension that had accumulated in the air dissipates, sending a feeling of relief rippling across your body, so you can physically feel that, ah, it's really over, isn't it.

Compared to that, an American graduation ceremony almost seems like a party. While we did have a rehearsal, there was nothing comparable to practicing bow angles or timing, and after the schedule and prohibited behaviors were explained we just did a casual run through. On the day of, when our names were called, the audience cheered and clapped loudly, sometimes even frenetically. When I graduated, one family had even snuck in some vuvuzelas (those plastic horns you sometimes see at sports matches) to blare away on. The speeches from the representative student and teacher were also quite personal, often provoking laughter, and sometimes even touching on contentious political topics. And at the end, when everyone takes their caps in hand, throwing them into the sky without a care in the world, you can experience a completely different flavor of release. Giving a proper conclusion to a childhood, which will be carried around for the rest of one's life, is never easy, but I think both cultures' graduation ceremonies do so in a manner befitting that culture.

Now the time has come for me to try and give a proper conclusion as well. Whenever this time of year rolls around, the adults wring out their hearts for the best advice and deep words they can muster, and a flood of words spills over the graduates like a tidal wave, so I'll try to keep it short. Thank you for all your hard work; while there were difficult times, in the end, it was a lot of fun. Even though our paths have diverged, may we all someday bloom as beautiful flowers once again.

美しい花が咲くには、その花も
いずれ散らなければなりません。
散らなければ美しくないとさえ言
えます。つまり、何をかも終わり
が必ず訪れ、だからこそ意味があ
ります。日本の季節・文化・諺等
に触れたる意識せざるをえない理
念です。高校生活においては、そ
の終わりを具体化させるのが卒業
式です。ここで、卒業生の高校生
としての自分という花が散つて花
弁となり、それぞれの道に舞つて
行きます。そして今年は、三年間
の成長を見届けた花の中に、私も
混ぜてもらいます。

日本の卒業式はなによりも厳か
です。予行練習では歩き方、礼の
角度とタイミング、ステージでの
立ち振舞返事するときの「はい」
の声の大きさまで、卒業生が何回
も練習させられます。初めて見た
ときに数えてみたけど、代表生徒
以外が12回起立して20回礼をす
るので、必要な練習なのでしょう。
当日にその練習の成果が充分見ら
れるけど、各仕草を意識しなけれ
ばならないので、体育館が隅々ま
で緊張感で溢れています。

その緊張感を膨らませて肌にの
しかかってるように感じさせるの
が卒業式の静かさです。最後の見
送りまでは、雜音や歓声や拍手が
ほとんどなく、卒業式の各部分が
確実に、整然と、執り行われるだ
けです。それぞれの辞は、学校生
活を振り返つたり卒業生を祝福し
たりするけど、変哲もなく淡々と
述べられます。卒業証書授与は、
何もない部屋に規則正しく時間を
刻む時計の音のように、卒業生の
名前が呼ばれて一人一人の「はい」
が返つてくるリズミカルな繰り返
しです。国歌・校歌・式歌の合唱で
も、感動的な一体感を感じられま
すが、重々しく歌われます。

長い間この張り詰めた空気に浸
りながら、一切動けない、音一つ
も出せない、と皆がずっと意識し

ているので、見ているだけでも疲れます。しかし、大切な終わりに相応しい、厳肅で物悲しい雰囲気だと思います。そしてやがて卒業生が退場する、皆が盛大な拍手で見送るので、積もるに積もった重い空気が一気に霧散して、身体を駆け巡る開放感からは、本当に終わったな、と身を持つて感じられます。それに比べたら、アメリカの卒業式はパーティーに近いかもしれません。予行練習はしたものの、礼の角度や声の大きさ等の指導はもちろんなく、禁止行為と当日の流れが説明されて一回軽く通すくらいでした。本番では各卒業生の名前が呼ばれたら、観客全員がたまに歎血だと思わせるまで拍手したり歓声を上げたりします。私が卒業したとき、ブブゼラ（スボーツ試合などで見られるプラスチック性の管楽器）を持ち込んで騒々しく吹いていた家族さえいました。代表者の生徒や先生の辞も個人的な内容が多くて、笑いを起こしたり政治的な話にふれたりする部分もよくありました。そして最後に、卒業生がキャップを手にとって、遠慮なしに全力で空に投げたる混乱極まった終わり方も印象的で、違う味の開放感を体験します。これから的人生に背負つっていく「子供時代」に終止符を打つのは容易ではないと思いますが、どの卒業式もその文化らしく終わりを告げると思います。

そして私も私らしく終止符を打たなければならないときが来てしまいました。いつもこの時期になると、大人たちが心からアドバイスや深い言葉を絞り出して、その言葉が怒濤のように卒業生に向かってはいるので、手短にします。今までの長い年月お疲れ様です。大変なときもあつたけど、とても楽しかったです。それぞれの道に進んでも、いつかまた美しい花として咲きましょう。