

## 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.

## 卒業式

美しい花が咲くには、その花もいづ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、何も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・諺等に触れたら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って花弁となり、それぞれの道に舞って行きます。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」の声の大ききまで、卒業生が何回も練習させられます。初めて見たときにも数えてみたけど、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ぬので、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ものしかかってい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、雑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から。それぞれの辞は、学校生活活を振り返っ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。卒業証書授与と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」が返ってくるリズムカルな繰り返いです。国歌・校歌・式歌の合唱も、感動的な一休感を感じられませんが、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、厳粛で物悲しい雰囲気だと思えます。そしてやがて卒業生が退場すると、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、と身を持って感じられます。

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ない。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、観客全員がたたまに熱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（スポーツ試合などで見られるプラスチックの管楽器）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ると、遠慮なく終わった方にも印象的で、違う味の開放感を体験します。これからの人生に背負っていただく「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、どこ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ぬ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を深い言葉を絞り出して、その言葉が怒涛のように卒業生に向けてられているので、手短にします。今まで長い年月お疲れ様です。大変なときもあったけれど、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。