

# The culture shock of Ichiro

Scholarly sources:

Uno, Kathleen S. (1999) *Passages to modernity: Motherhood, childhood, and social reform in Early Twentieth century Japan*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press.

Jones, Mark (2010). *Children as treasures: Childhood and the middle class in early twentieth century Japan*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asian Center.

## Meet Ichiro

Ichiro Ito was an eighteen-year-old youth living in Japan in 1922. He lived in a wealthy household and his name meant "first son" in Japanese.



## Ichiro's world

Ichiro was the first son of Seiichi, who had been the first son of his father.

First sons were expected to be family heirs. Heirs had the responsibility of watching over the entire family and often the extended family.



Once Ichiro married, he'd be responsible for producing an heir himself.

See, Ichiro's entire world was being part of a patriline. Relatives in this patriline were only those descended from the male lines. People related to him through his mother's side of the family weren't considered his responsibility. They belonged to a different patriline.

Families often kept mementos of their patrilines in family shrine closets.





Ancestors in this patriline were also important in Ichiro's religion of Shintoism. Whenever a child was born, a local Shinto shrine (see right) would add the child's name to a list kept at the shrine and declare him or her a "family child." After death this child became a "family spirit", or "family *kami*." A *kami* is a god that must be worshipped.



Ichiro's family also worshipped 30 other *kami* at the Shinto shrines. These *kami* were clan founders or past emperors (see right). Worship of the *kami* in his religion ensured that blessings and security would be passed on to all generations.

Under this system, Ichiro understood his role as one of many links that held the past and the future together—nothing more.





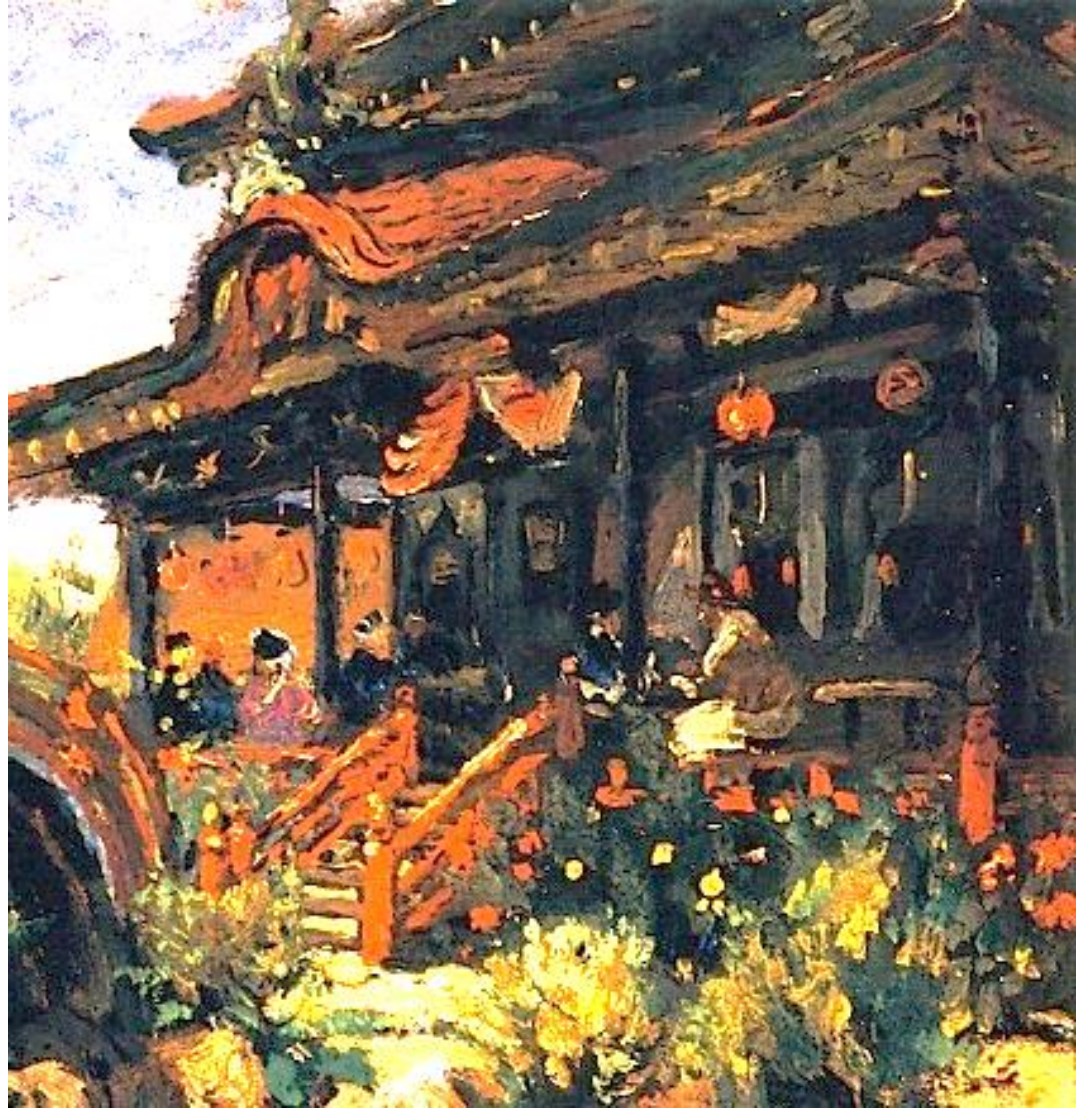
But all his beliefs would be challenged in 1922 when he came in contact with a different culture.

But before we get to this, let's tell you a little bit about Ichiro's everyday life.



## Ichiro's daily life

Ichiro's family was wealthy by Japanese standards and lived in a lovely house. Twenty-four members of Ichiro's extended family also lived there.





The Japanese valued cleanliness, order, and beauty.

Japanese houses were divided into panels. The panels would open and close, making new rooms. A room that had been a giant dining room one day might be two bedrooms the next day.

The houses were always kept spotless.



Ichiro's house was surrounded by beautiful gardens that included streams and bridges.





Ichiro's diet consisted of carefully prepared fish, rice, and vegetables. While much attention was paid to the taste of the food, even more attention was paid to the beauty of the food presentation.





The women of the house did most of the cooking. Serving tea was itself a work of art and there were many rules on how the tea would be made and served.



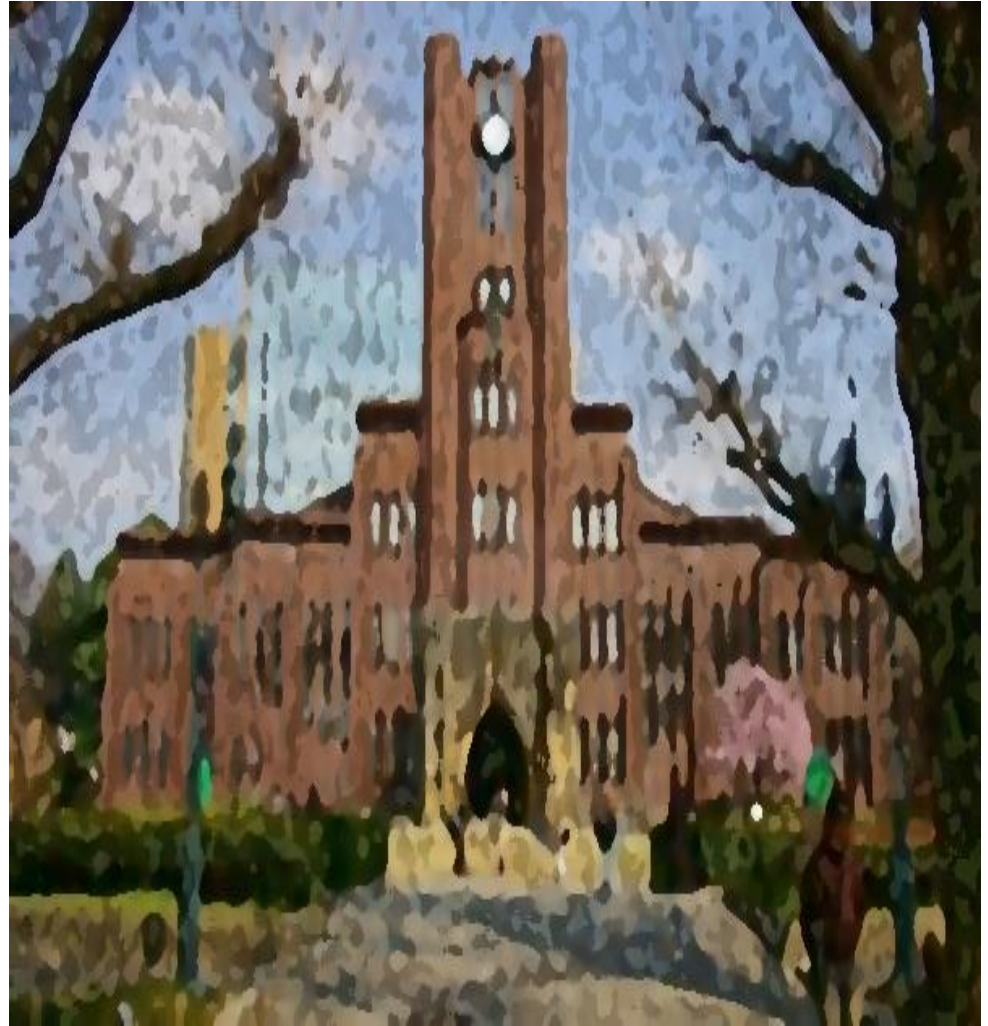
But the work of the house was not Ichiro's responsibility. His life was focused nearly entirely on becoming the heir—and this meant *education, education, education.*





In Japan, it was critical for young people to be admitted into the right colleges. Failure to get into these colleges meant family shame and few opportunities for good incomes later in life. Ichiro needed a good income to care for his immediate family and extended family.

But getting into the colleges was not easy.



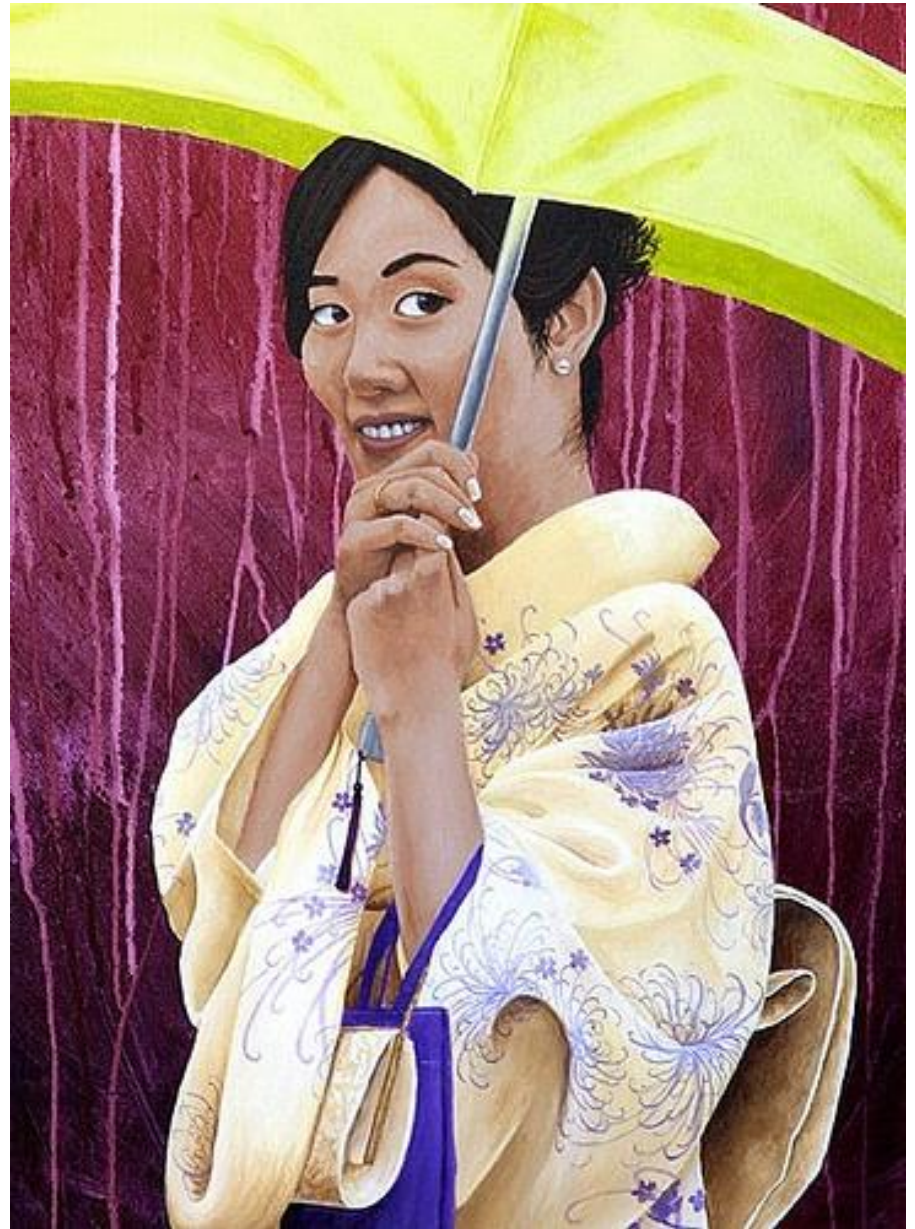


Youth in middle to upper class Japan had to write perfect Japanese. This in itself was much harder than writing other languages. Japanese writing was a combination of Chinese characters and Japanese words which included many foreign elements. Because of this mixture of scripts, the Japanese writing system is often considered to be the most complicated anywhere in the world.

A large, bold, black Japanese character '運' (un) is displayed on the right side of the page. The character is written in a highly stylized, calligraphic font with thick, rounded strokes. It consists of a top radical '辶' (shu) and a right radical '云' (un). The overall shape is wide and somewhat irregular, with a prominent horizontal base and a curved top.

Ichiro's mother, Mayu—like most middle and upper class Japanese mothers—committed most of her days to helping Ichiro and his siblings read and write perfectly and study to pass their entrance exams.

She spent hours every day helping them with their homework and keeping distractions at bay.



Because Ichiro would be the family heir, she also sent him to special tutoring classes for more assistance. The classes took most of Ichiro's weekend and after-school time.





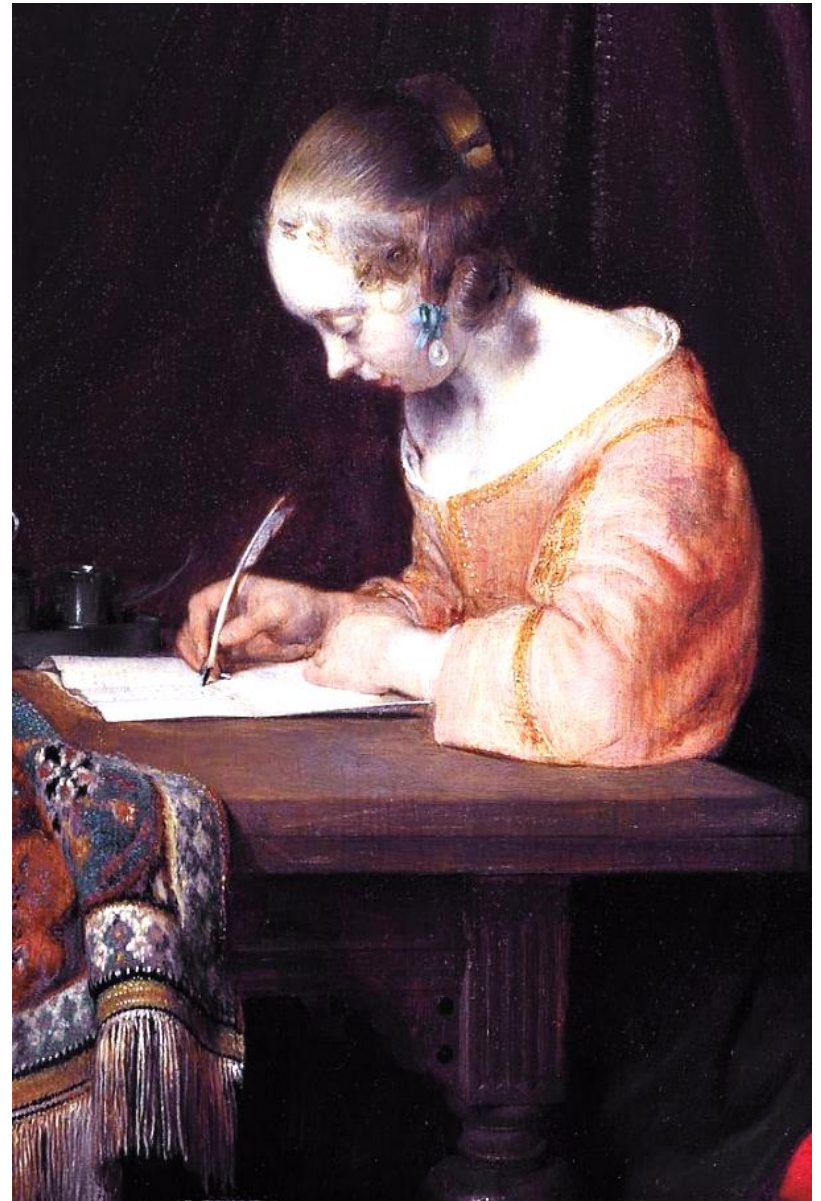
In addition to this, Mayu had the responsibility of watching over her son's health, to make sure he'd make a good family heir. She arranged for weekly exercise and martial arts classes.



In addition, Mayu hired a European tutor to teach Ichiro many other languages, including English.

Why did he have to know English?

That's where we get to our account of Ichiro's culture shock.



## The culture shock

Ichiro's father Seiichi had an important job as a member of Japan's diplomatic team. One of their roles was to attend meetings of the League of Nations in Geneva, Switzerland. The League had been set up after World War One to help develop peace between nations.

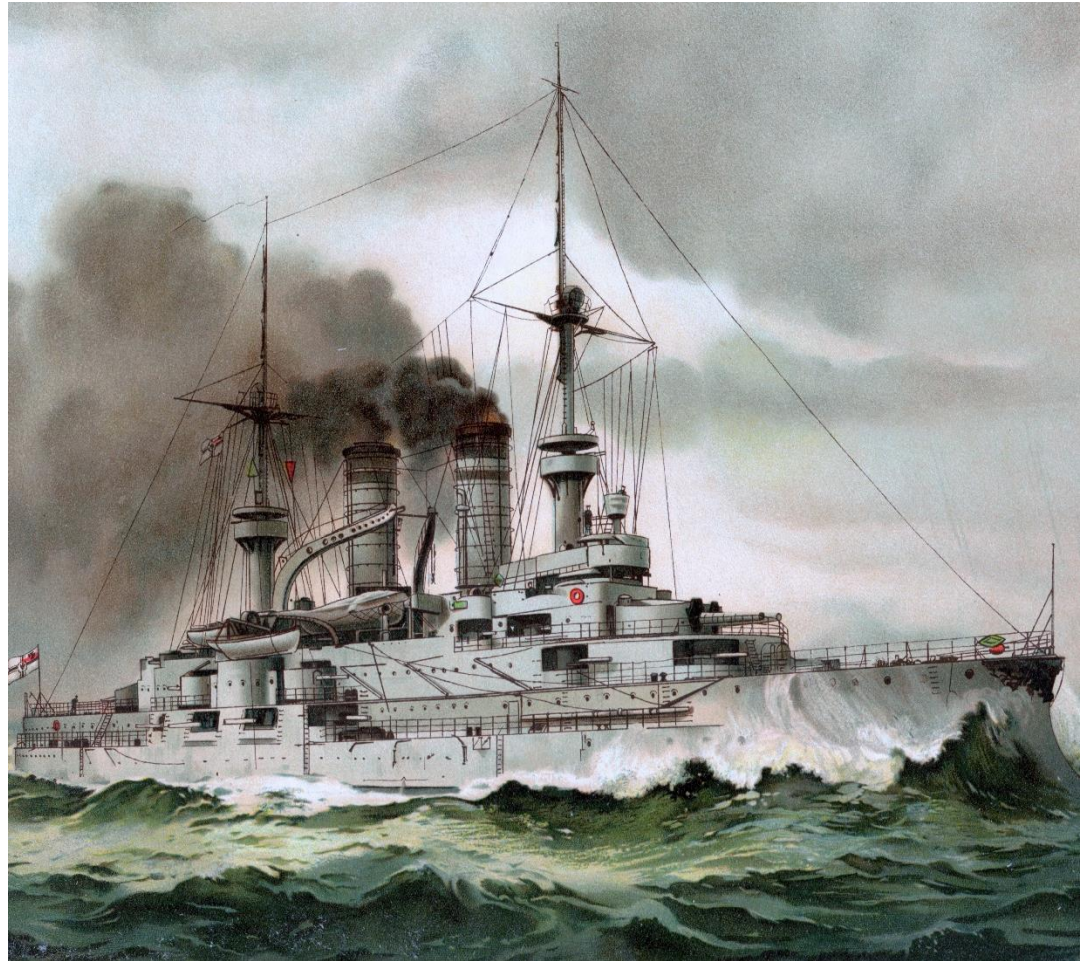
Ichiro was expected to follow in his father's career, if he succeeded in graduating from one of the top colleges.





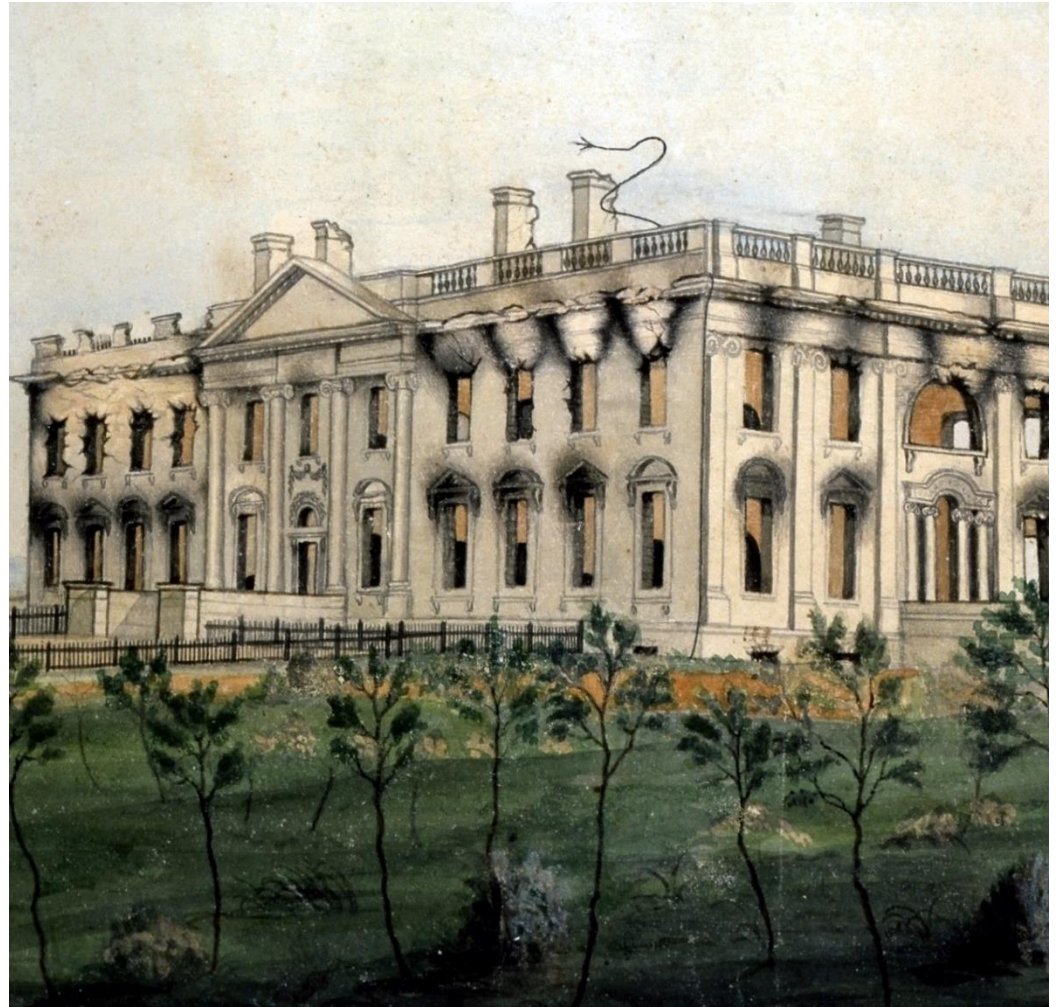
About a month before Ichiro was about to take his entrance exams, Seiichi came to his son with a surprise. He could accompany his father to the United States where Seiichi's diplomatic team would attend the important Washington Naval Conference. The conference was supposed to discuss disarmament of some of the powerful nations, including Japan.

Ichiro was thrilled, and he instantly prepared himself for the trip.



They went to Washington DC. The city amazed Ichiro. While his father had to attend meetings during the day and often at night, the two would take carriage or car rides all around the city when Seiichi had time off. They even visited the White House.

Ichiro was learning so much about American history.





One day while his father was at a day/night meeting, Ichiro went to visit a museum near his hotel. At the museum he met a young off-duty sailor who introduced himself as Herman Schmidt.





The two met at a diner afterwards for supper and had a long conversation. Ichiro told him about his responsibilities back in Japan and how badly he was working to pass his college entrance exams.

"How old are you?" asked the sailor.

"Eighteen," Ichiro answered.

Ichiro didn't know what Herman was getting at.



"You haven't even lived yet. I'm eighteen. I used to live on a farm in Nebraska where I had to work very hard. But I left my family's farm to see the world. I mean, it's the 1920s and we need to have fun."





"Come with me," Herman ordered.

Herman took Ichiro to his rented car. He drove down the city streets. "Here is where we first pick up some girls."

"Why?" asked Ichiro.

"Why? To dance and have fun with them. What do you do on a date?"





"I don't know about dates," Ichiro responded. "When the time comes my parents will help me pick a bride. It will be one who will bring honor to my family and raise the next heir."

"What a wasted life you've led," sneered Herman. "Come with me and I'll show you a great time. I know where we can get some bootlegged booze."



Herman led Ichiro to a park where couples were dancing and drinking illegally. You see, this was during the time of Prohibition in the United States when it was against the law to produce, sell, or drink liquor.

Herman gave Ichiro drinks that made him dizzy.

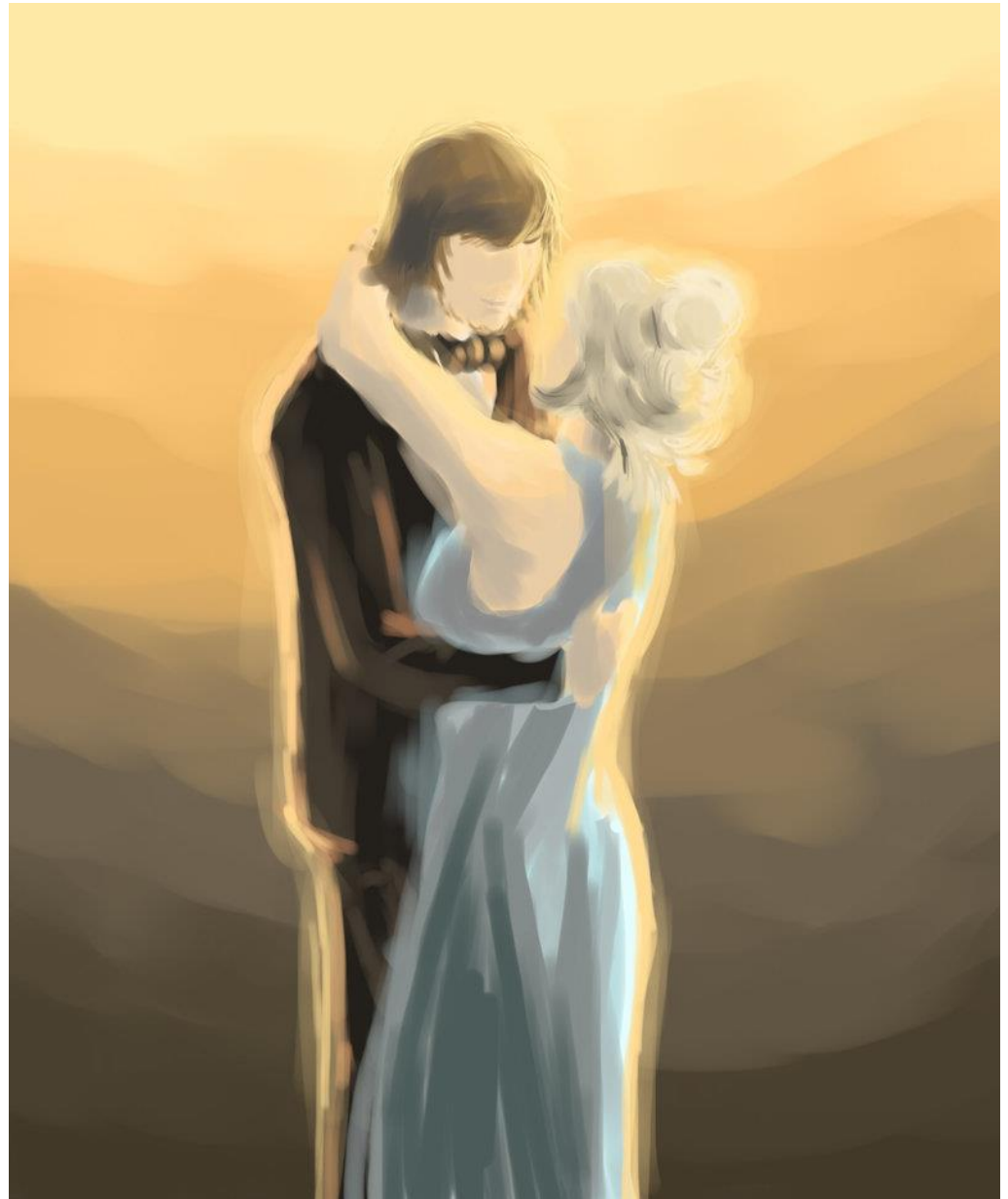
Ichiro wondered if he was having "fun."





They went on to a nightclub where Ichiro did try to dance with an American girl. But he was now too dizzy from the liquor to stay on his feet.

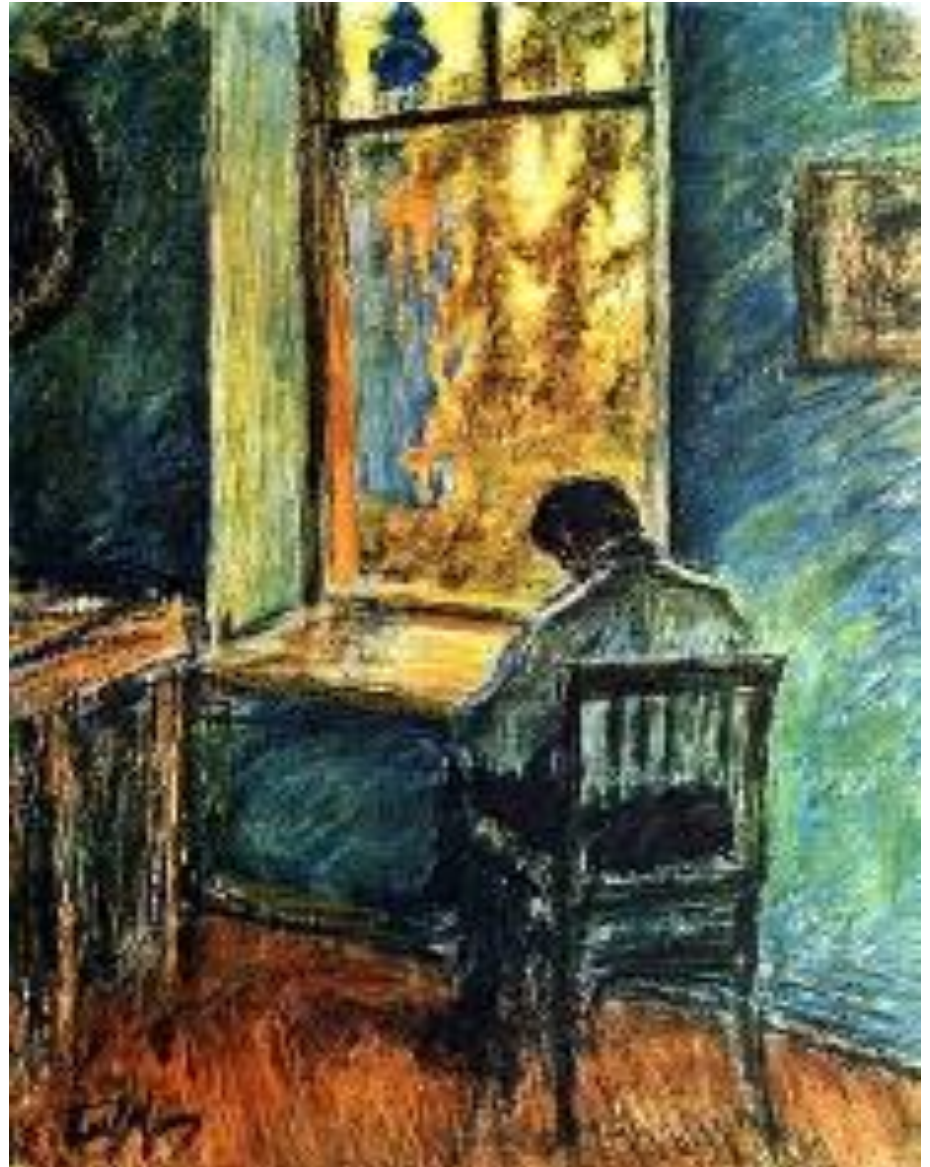
Finally Herman drove him back to his hotel. "See Ichiro, what you could be doing with your life? I'm on my way now to see the world and I'll be thinking of you all tied up in your family obligations."





Ichiro never told his father about his "night on the town" with the sailor. For the rest of the trip he just sat in his room trying to understand what he'd just experienced.

He decided to discuss this with his mother when he got home.



When he got home he found his mother walking with her umbrella. He told the entire story to his her—even the parts about getting drunk.

"I don't understand why the sailor and I were both the same age and yet have such different ways of looking at our world," he explained. "I was trying to see life from his point of view, but it was just all so different."





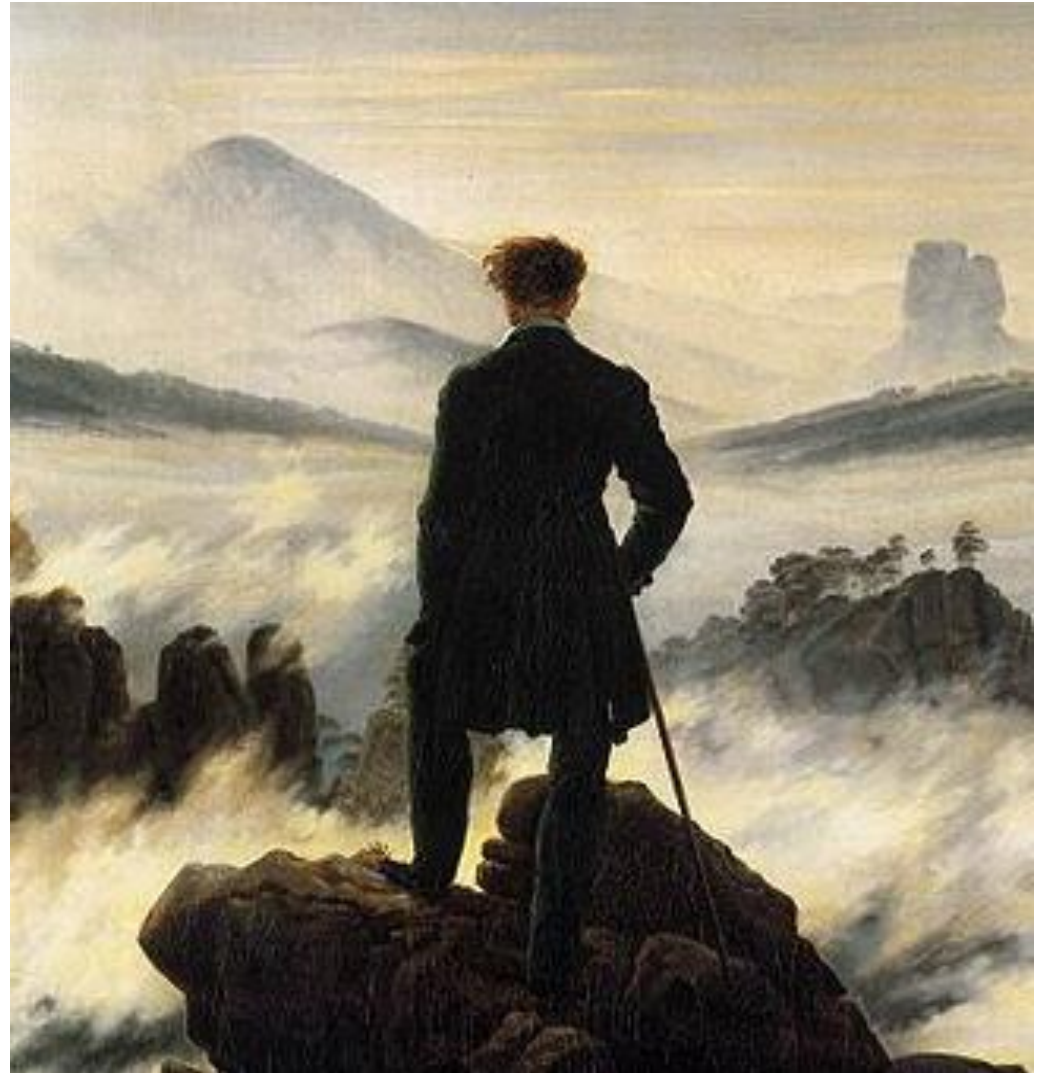
"Ah yes, my son. You've experienced culture shock. I experienced this too when I went with your father to America before you were born.

"See, in the East where we live, the focus of our lives is on our lineage—our extended family. If we get educated or gain an income, it is to help all of them. It is our duty."



"But in the West, it is different," continued Ichira's mother. "They focus more on the individual. A man can leave his entire lineage behind and this is not considered to be a bad thing. He may not even know who his ancestors were. They say over there that a man has a duty to himself. And we would not ever consider this.

"Now, which culture do you prefer?" asked his mother.





Ichiro answered. "I prefer to be a link in my lineage. I would feel very alone any other way."

"And I'm sure your sailor friend prefers his own culture," Mayu responded. "Welcome home, my son. Let us all get properly dressed and go celebrate."

The family went to a teahouse and had a wonderful time.



The end

Let's talk!!!!!!