

## Japanese Culture Now

# Defure (Deflation): We love “inexpensive, quality” merchandise!

In March 2001, the Japanese government officially confirmed the description of the Japanese economy using the phrase “*yuruyaka na defure jōtai*,” meaning “experiencing the effects of continuous, gradual deflation,” for the first time since the end of World War II. With this announcement, the word “defure” entered the popular vocabulary.

Japan is well known for the high price of everything related to food, clothing, and housing, and, especially in the cities, one is forced to use quite a bit of money living day to

day. With the bad times for business seeming to continue without end, consumers are now being forced to curb their spending. As a natural result they are seeking out “inexpensive but quality” merchandise.

An economy experiencing deflation is not necessarily healthy and can even end up in collapse. Still, considering the high prices they had to pay up until now, consumers are happy when they find it easier to obtain “inexpensive, quality” merchandise.

### Half-price Weekday Hamburgers



The “hamburgers half-price on weekdays” sale begun in February 2000 by the fast-food chain McDonald's has been much talked about. From Monday to Friday, a hamburger (regular price ¥130) is ¥65, and a cheeseburger (regular price ¥160) is ¥80. According to McDonald's Japan the strategy was effective, increasing visitors to its restaurants 18.3 percent over the previous year to an aggregate 1.318 billion in 2000. Gross sales increased to

a record figure of approximately ¥430 billion.

The McDonald's half-price campaign triggered similar sales not only at other hamburger chains like Lotteria, but at the *gyūdon* (牛丼 beef bowl) chain Matsuya, which cut the price of its regular-size *gyūdon* bowl from ¥400 to ¥290. Lowered prices are also spreading to restaurant menus and the *o-bentō* (boxed lunches) sold in convenience stores.

### UNIQLO

While sales in the apparel departments of department stores and large-scale supermarket chains have fallen off, the casual-wear apparel store Uniqlo has been growing rapidly. The Fast Retail Company, which operates Uniqlo, handles everything from design, to manufacture, to sales, applying thoroughgoing cost-reduction and quality control management. Ninety percent of its products are manufactured in factories in China. The secrets to its success are astonishingly low prices, simple designs that can be worn by young and old alike, good quality materials and stitching, variety of colors and sizes, and skillful advertising featuring popular entertainers.

The popularity of Uniqlo's already well-liked fleece jacket (¥1,900) burgeoned after the array of colors was increased from the former 15 to 50 last winter, and 25 million jackets, three times the 8.5 million sold the previous year, were sold. With seasonal hit products such as chino slacks and T-shirts, its popularity has remained strong, although some people object to the impersonality and uniformity of the brand.



### 100-Yen Shops



Shops featuring a wide variety of merchandise all uniformly priced at 100 yen (although consumption tax is added to total purchases) are known as 100-yen shops. Now quite ubiquitous in urban areas, some 100-yen chain stores have made their appearance as well. Known for the variety of their merchandise, they sell household necessities, food products, stationery supplies, cosmetics, sewing notions, and many other items. Shoppers are inevitably disarmed by the low per-item price and enjoy picking up one item after another, often buying more than they need.

In Tokyo's Shibuya district the chain store Daisō does a flourishing business from a building of four stories above ground and a basement stocked completely with 100-yen goods. The store is always filled with the young people who flock to this entertainment center of the city.

