

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

AAG-5

Cultural Re-entry

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Dear Peter,

My return to Japan has been a test of wits. There have been moments of cross-cultural consternation, and temptations to make sweeping assessments of the Japanese bureaucratic system and the portentous message it spells for future US-Japanese relations. This thrill I have resisted, but let me tell you why I got so worked up.

The first setback was shortly after landing at Narita airport. I anticipated the usual routine - getting to the immigration officer and having the usual courteous exchange in Japanese be met by the gentle surprise at my language facility, a joke or two, and then a polite bow and it's over. This time, it was an unexpected snare, an uncomfortable pause, and goodbye to the little blue book that had become an icon of my existence in Japan, the *gaikokujin torokucho*, or the "alien registration booklet".

In it were stamped my fingerprint (a sore spot for many civil libertarians), my photograph (a most respectable professional-looking English teacher pose) and all of my various visa statuses (statii?) - a record of the struggles that I had gone through to distinguish myself apart from the ordinary tourist, to secure work permission, extend my visits, and change my visa status in evolutionary ascendant splendor to include Researcher( 4-1-8), and even to attain the 4-1-16-1, the enviable "special status" visa, for which only spouses of Japanese nationals, and other exclusive categories of Aliens can qualify.

My extended visit back to the US had made me forgetful of this struggle, for apparently the visa I had last gotten expired in March (I knew this, and took the precaution of getting a new visa at the Japanese embassy in Washington). I had more recently acquired the Exit Permit, the good-for-one year-multiple-entry variety, but what I was to discover only at the airport inspection counter was that it didn't extend the core visa's time limit.

It might mean that I was going to have to start again at zero. All of my medals, the different visa status numbers that I had come to be proud of, like battle scars, were to disappear with the little booklet that this man was holding behind the glass separating me from his desk.

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"You will need a new one". My mind was spinning...what did this mean for my hard fought years of continuous residence? Those day-long waits in line at the Tokyo Immigration Bureau, the half-year rituals with hundreds of other hapless souls. Was it for nothing? Must I start over? I was so close to that Nirvana of Visas, the Permanent Resident status - only four more years!(it is a seven year process)

Had I actually lost continuity of residential status? Later at the Setagaya Ward office, the primary repository of all the specific details that the Japanese government has required of me in triplicate, I wanted to appeal to Reason that I in fact was meeting the continuity requirements by having not been out of the country for more than a year. I spoke to the clerk at the desk and sought some understanding that this was a matter the airport official might not have been able to fully appreciate.

No dice. I had to duplicate the whole procedure over again, erasing all sorts of links to my past here, including insurance numbers, bank account references, etc. I continue to expect that some other official will see the wisdom of my views, and will not dash my hopes of permanent residence ( which are fundamentally wishes of being able to avoid the hassle of ever visiting another immigration bureau again!)

My troubles on return to Tokyo were compounded by the agony that for several hours after getting back to my wife Kazari and my one year old Regina, the latter didn't recognize me - worse still she looked a little scared. The former was not terribly supportive, saying that I had been away too long. I did everything I could think of to get the little one back, and finally succeeded with a familiar tune.

The next morning we were off on a train to Kyoto, and then to Nara, in order that Kazari could attend the wedding of a childhood friend. I was to have the full day as Regina's companion, and despite my jet lag, we took the town for a serious sight seeing tour, including the Daibutsu-den temple.

The present structure was built in 1708, and though two-thirds the size of the original eighth century temple, is still said to be the largest wooden structure in the world, and houses the enormous "Great Buddha of Nara", another world record holder for bronze statuary. If one were to need a visual reference for farmer/philosopher Masanobu Fukuoka's message about the futility of humanity's search for complete knowledge ("...these dreams of scientists are just mirages, nothing more than wild dancing in the hand of the Lord Buddha...") - this would be the image to pick.

I had wanted to see the majestic temples of Nara for a long while, and this was more than enough compensation for the cultural lag I had been afflicted with. The exquisite joinery and craftsmanship of the temples, here in the heart of the ancient capital, were an arrow shot straight into the central historic uniqueness of Japan. In the temple gardens, the azaleas were in bloom, and a soft May breeze blowing an unseen wind chime completed the picture.

But the most memorable moment of the day was the ramen lunch we had together, where Regina stood on a restaurant chair and showed me the new tricks that she had learned to do with noodles, slurping them up and wiggling them as she tilted her head back. We laughed at the freedom and naughtiness away from mommy's and waitresses' watch, and

deepened our joy at being a team again.

In the span of a week I had seen enough to feel once again transported back to Old Japan. Kazari wore her kimono for her friend's formal wedding and got a small sample of what it feels like to not be recognized by your own child. (With the unusual dress and white face powder, Regina was startled and fearful of being held by her). I'd seen the temples in Nara, and took part in a centuries-old ritual of green tea harvesting. (more about that later) What remained for us was to go back to modern Tokyo, and deal with the whole process of getting the household effects, and the mini-motor home, off of the transport ships and through customs.

The ship that I had loaded Rocinante on (the name of my handmade van, for those who have not followed my other exploits) was named Madame Butterfly, and apparently the whole fleet is named after famous operas. Glad I was that I had missed Faust. Madame was to arrive on the 19th, and so that gave us about a week to get the necessary papers together.

I had made some preliminary inquiries about what would be required when I was in Washington, D.C. and was given advice by an official of JETRO, the official Japanese export authority, that made it seem simple. He was in New York, and belonged to the automobile section, so I had little cause for doubt that his advice was sound and up-to-date.

I could temporarily export the van, and under a tourist status and a special agreement governing the use of motor vehicles abroad, would be free from the Japanese duties and inspection fees.

These fees are collectively called "shaken", and must be paid in annual or biannual cycles. They are notoriously expensive and constitute an arguably significant non-tariff trade barrier. Because all cars are subject to them, Japanese cars included, it appears on the surface that it is a fair deal. But the reality is that the retrofitting which must be done to vehicles that don't meet the official standards to the letter is very expensive, and of course, Japanese manufacturers know of these requirements and any subsequent changes can be relatively easily incorporated into the manufacturing process. Foreign manufacturers could also endeavor to tailor-make models for the Japanese market, and probably will have to, 'if' large scale demand arises.

The inspections can involve minor details, like the color of the rear lights, and their position, but also can involve the entire exhaust and emissions system. The rules vary for engine size, gross weight of vehicle, and other items. For example, since my vehicle has a propane gas stove, I would be bumped into an extra expensive category, with more frequent inspections (and shaken payments).

Kazari recently saw an advertisement for a magazine that had one "hook" for an article about how recently imported foreign cars were polluting Japan. I suspect that the article deals with the fact that many are coming through as diesel cars, but that this is because the Japanese fuel emissions requirements for standard gas vehicles are so expensive and difficult to meet is probably not a cause that the article attributes to the trend toward importing diesel models.

At any rate, it was a source of comfort that I had official information about being able to forgoe all of this shaken business.

The nightmare that would ensue was to discover that no one who worked on this side of the Pacific, either in the commercial import agency, or the Customs Bureau, the Ministry of Transport, the US Embassy, or the Japan Automobile Federation knew of this exemption. The difference in cost between our little known exemption, and the usual treatment, was on the order of three to four thousand dollars, and an unpredictable amount of weeks, or months, delay.

Much of our time was spent telephoning and visiting various persons, offices, and friends who had any connection to the System or experience in importing a vehicle. What was probably the most frustrating aspect of all of this was that no consistent account of what was involved could be found. Kazari was even patronizingly reprimanded by a young office girl on the phone from the Japanese office of JETRO for not having made 'a better' investigation of what was required prior to beginning this enterprise. Enough to twist rods of steel!

I will spare you many of the confounding details, because eventually the story did take a better turn. A man, whose name aptly translates as "island", from the Ministry of Transport did know what the first official from New York was talking about, and he became the beacon for the remainder of our odyssey.

Despite the tension and confusion, what I began to see unfolding was that here was a very good contact sport to learn from, provided one had the right spirit and safety equipment.

Against the advice of the wiser, we had decided to handle the entire process by ourselves, instead of hiring an import agent. Besides saving about \$800 in fees, it was clear that our would-be professional help did not know about our special exemption, and would have made invisible this whole subterranean labyrinth of rules and processes, disorder and intrigue.

While I was searching for some wider meaning in all of this, I happened to attend a presentation that a friend gave to a recent meeting of the Tokyo Businessman's Club, on the subject of Japan-US relations. Bill Kelly, a long time resident in Japan and now a lecturer at Sanno Junior College in Tokyo, writes and speaks publicly on themes in inter-cultural communications.

He suggested that our present level of conflict lies deeper than the conventional focus on trade and political issues, and probed into psychological and cultural factors. Reviewing the relationship in this light, he proposed a pattern of recurring episodes when America's "civilizing mission" was to clash with Japanese cultural identity and nation-building objectives.

My humble struggle with the bureaucracy here led me to wonder whether something wasn't operating at level beyond the factual realm of procedure and requirement; I began to find some utility in exploring what psychological and cultural assumptions were behind my frustration and distress: Was it my individualistic cultural background and political socialization that was leading me to expect entirely different things from the bureaucrats than what they saw as necessary and proper?

Toward the end of his presentation. Kelly proposed that there were Japanese and American writers who were beginning to see the need for

values that could involve borrowing more of what the other culture has to offer. At the very least, a careful comparison might lend variety to the current fashion of bashing each other.

One author he mentioned in the US, Robert Bellah, (HABITS OF THE HEART) has written of the need to develop more of a sense of community and to move away from the supremacy of the individualistic ethic, and to rediscover the American communitarian tradition. His view is that America lacks a clear public philosophy which might give the nation a sense of direction and purpose.

The corresponding Japanese voices for change come from writers such as Ohmae Ken'ichi, who is demanding that there be more public debate, that the government should give rational explanations of its policies, and relinquish its monopoly on information... ("this sounds like individualism" Bill suggested.)

I felt that during my import opera I was being subjected to capricious authority because there was obviously contradictory information coming at us, which had dramatically different consequences. Moreover, rational explanations, the stuff of democratic participatory expectations, were a scarce commodity at best.

But was I right in assuming that these were universal held and cherished values?

I strain at the thought that unless I am sufficiently obsequious to a bureaucrat, I might not get the fair and equal treatment that I deserve. Substitute "properly respectful" for "sufficiently obsequious" for another perspective on the problem.

Moreover, I like to find ways to simplify the process, rather than have to deal with all the intermediate steps. I detest, what seems to me as inefficient and extraneous, the numerous visits to individual windows for stamping and form-filling operations. (I am not great at patiently waiting in long lines for parts of a process, either).

But these seem vital and necessary to clerks here and are organizationally favorable for the authorities, who can specialize on one aspect of the problem, while sending the individual, who is after all getting a favor from all of this, around to each counter.

When there is some question that is not completely clear, they seem only to want to pass the accountability for the resolution to some other window or office - no independent or systematic decision making here. But to consult, to not assume the personal authority, are not these group oriented values?

At my worst I think of them as process-fixed simpletons, incapable of seeing things any wider than the boxes on the forms, and certainly not My Way.

To do so would be to treat me as a special case, because I might not fit into the typical case. Here lies what I perceive to be the crux of the matter. One of the most recurring elements of the system is the recourse to behind the scenes "case-by-case" decision making. It has even entered the Japanese lexicon as "keisu-bi-keisu". Only what those elements are that would lead to a successful presentation of a keisu are not always apparent, or clearly explained.

My expectation is that a bureaucracy provides the explanations, the particulars, and I see how I fit in, or can comply (or avoid) the

regulations. Theirs is that I provide all of the necessary information, and await a decision.

And if I just don't understand, I sometimes expect that this will free me of the need to fully participate. As a matter of fact, some 'gaijin' have developed this strategy into an art - and sometimes succeed at escaping a fee, or having to comply with all the rules. This exceptionalism is sometimes explained as 'Gaijin ni yowai', and it means, literally, being weak (soft) on outsiders (foreigners/aliens).

Among my friends who are in bi-cultural marriages, this is a topic of some controversy; it's challenged by the Japanese spouse as being abusive of customary hospitality, and by the gaijin spouse as a small reward for constantly being regarded as an outsider. Most agree that it doesn't get very far within the home.

In actuality, I suspect it is a pragmatic solution to what would otherwise result in conflict and flare-ups, and besides saving face, it might save time when dealing with those not schooled in the subtleties of hierarchical society and the complete acceptance of authority.

My Latin experiences sometimes lead me to expect very different things, when I imagine how a typical encounter with a window clerk or a police officer might proceed (How do the Japanese in Brazil manage, I wonder?). It is not impossible for a moment of difficulty to be overcome with an appeal to our common strain under the yoke of anonymous and impersonal Regulation, and the shrugging off of the seeming arbitrariness of it all can be liberation for both of us, especially if it is accompanied by some small reward for the official's sensitivity to the peculiar conditions at hand. How differently the sympathy with life's struggles over a visa technicality, or a parking meter expired can proceed!

In Japan, the recipe is completely different. Having a mountain of different forms, stamped and signed from all of the various and related offices concerned is the basic pre-requisite. And if not a native, then the right attitude: either gamesmanship (a combination of poker, ping-pong, and mountaineering) or a willingness to take the consequences of sheer unquestioning obedience, and in either case a lot of patience.

It is not only for foreigners to be reminded of this - a minor incident at one of our many visits to the customs offices showed me that the natives might also slip up.

As I was seated with Regina, who has displayed remarkable patience with the drab office decor of officialdom, I watched a pair of young Japanese women come into the Customs Inspection Clearance Office. When they discovered that they would have to deal with an intermediate customs office at another location, they made the mistake of assuming they could somehow short-circuit the process, and rather bluntly asked the young customs official to make the call for them on the telephone - and got a strong reaction. It built up into a minor scene, with obvious indignation on both sides of the counter.

The following day, on another (and finally successful!) visit to that office, I met this young man in the hall, and pried curiously at his reaction to these impudents. "Some people just don't understand how the system works" he said.

Soo desu nee...(indeed!)

Received in Hanover 7/9/90

Bert Wishes  
