

To Be Foreign in Japan

By Adrian Dickson

THERE is a line in Sofia Coppola's 2003 movie *Lost in Translation* with which every first-time traveler to Japan can easily relate. Bob Harris (Bill Murray), a middle-aged American actor who comes to Tokyo to tape a Suntory whisky commercial, turns to his co-star Charlotte (Scarlett Johansson) at a hotel bar and says: "Can you keep a secret? I am trying to organize a prison break. We have to first get out of this bar, then the hotel, then the city, and then the country. Are you in or are you out?"

It is a joke, of course. Harris can leave Japan whenever he likes. But the humor resides in that at some point in a trip to Japan – usually quite early on – a foreigner will experience an acute sense of cultural claustrophobia caused by his complete inability to connect with his surroundings. The locals are polite, but discreetly mark their distance. Street signs and restaurant menus are utterly incomprehensible. Conversations with ordinary people – taxi drivers, waitresses, metro wardens – are stunted, painful affairs, replete with misunderstanding. Like Harris in the movie, the foreigner longs for relief and dreams of an imaginary escape hatch that will quickly return him to someplace friendly and familiar.

Welcome to the foreigner's experience in Japan – a trip like no other.

Japan is a full course meal – an ancient, sophisticated culture, rich in tradition and diversity, populated by highly educated people who share an extraordinary sense of what it means to be Japanese. But the country is not easily approached. Think of your first encounter with a difficult Wagnerian opera. You know the music is magnificent, overwhelming even, but can you honestly say you enjoyed it? Like Wagner, Japan requires some preliminary education before it can be appreciated.

Japan has always had an ambivalent relationship with the outside world. While the Japanese acknowledge a huge

debt to China from whence they imported script, political organization and the massive cultural edifice that accompanied Buddhism, they draw a clear line between what is home grown and what comes from abroad. The 48 character Katakana syllabary is used mainly to write words that are loaned from other languages and have no direct translation into traditional Japanese.

The relationship between the Japanese and foreigners has always been strained. In the 17th century, the country sealed itself from the outside world after the ruling shogun, alarmed by the growth of Jesuit-inspired Catholicism, stamped out Western faith and on pain of death, banned his countrymen from any kind of contact with foreigners. That ban remained in place for over 200 years until 1853 when US Commodore Perry's "Black Ships" famously forced Japan to open up to the world. In the half century since the end of World War II, Japan has struggled to establish a new kind of relationship with the world. While the country enjoys a high standing in the United States and Europe, it is still viewed with suspicion by most of its neighbors many of whom cannot, or will not, forget the suffering the Japanese inflicted on them during its expansionist march through Asia in the first half of the 20th century.

By the standards of any developed country, Japan's foreign community is very small. The Immigration Bureau puts the total at 1.85 million people, the equivalent of 1.4% of Japan's population of 127.5 million. By comparison, the number of foreign residents in the United Kingdom, a country that is sometimes used as a benchmark for Japan, is equivalent to more than 7% of the population.

But even these figures are deceptive. The Koreans represent by far the largest community of foreigners in Japan, however, many of them are the second or third generation of people who either

chose or were forced to move to Japan to work as laborers before 1945 when Korea was a Japanese colony. Although most of them were born in Japan, they still carry foreign passports. Other large foreign groups include Chinese, Brazilians, Philippine nationals and Peruvians. Some of these came to Japan as students, but most work as laborers in areas such as construction. Among the women, a large number work as bar hostesses and what the Immigration Bureau classifies as "entertainers."

Westerners in Japan number no more than around 100,000 people. They are by any measure a hugely privileged group within the total foreign community. Many of these are professionals – bankers, lawyers, accountants, computer engineers – who work as managers in both Japanese and foreign corporations. They are particularly well represented in the financial services sector. More than half of these come from either the United States or the United Kingdom.

Westerners in Japan usually come in two kinds: expatriates and what I shall describe as long-term residents. The two often work together and may even mix socially, but their relationship with the country and the Japanese are quite distinct and merit some explanation.

The expatriates are a common breed seen in major business capitals around the world. They are usually sent to Japan by their corporations for two-year to five-year stints to fill a specific position or to complete a particular project. They send their children to international schools but as a rule have no interest in having them learning much more than basic Japanese.

The expatriates' life in Japan is generally quite sweet – they earn well and spend grandly. Tokyo supports a small industry that is fully dedicated to publishing glossy magazines designed to help expatriates spend their money. Like Harris in the Coppola movie, the expatriates' first weeks in Japan are



marked by profound culture shock. Stories abound of families who have barricaded themselves inside the Tokyo American Club, an expensive expatriate bunker, for fear of engaging the locals.

Over the course of their stay, this group will undergo an extraordinary transformation. As their confidence grows, they venture out and are quickly seduced by the country's traditional charms – the springtime cherry blossoms, the extravagant Roppongi bar scene, skiing holidays in the mountains of Hokkaido. By the time they are ready to leave their homes, they are stuffed with Imari porcelain and woodblock prints in mock imitation of traditional Japanese residences. “Sayonara” (farewell) parties can be tearful events in which they invoke a romantic vision of Japan as a country of gracious old ladies and friendly neighborhood fishmongers.

The long-term residents are all-together different. Generally, they have arrived in Japan at the start of their careers and have made a choice to live – or at least spend a large portion of their

life – in the country. Others came to Japan on a whim and before they know it they discover they have built a life in the country and that it is too late to return to where they were from. Their connections to Japan differ. For some, it is marriage to Japanese partner. For others, the attraction is Japanese culture itself. Sometimes the two come together. Unlike the expatriates, they are proud of their command of Japanese language which they have studied hard to learn. They have no patience with petty government officials, waiters and policemen who sometimes try to fob them off like they do with the foreigners who are just passing through.

Expatriates and long-term residents both enjoy an extraordinary unofficial Japanese perk, known as the foreigners’ “Get-Out-of-Jail-Free Card.” This is a liberty Westerners grant themselves to trample on the unstated (and some clearly stated) rules that hold Japanese society together. This can be as simple as ignoring a red light at a pedestrian crossing, which all normal Japanese patiently wait

to turn, or battling to transform Japan’s clubby business culture. To be fair, these liberties are not simply the result of Westerner’s boorish behavior as many Japanese are complicit with them. Every foreigner in Japan has a story to tell about a traffic policeman too flustered to deal with a foreigner who has driven through a red light, or a Japanese businessman who secretly conspires with his foreign partner to advance the cause of change in his country. That use of outside pressure, or *gaiatsu*, is in fact, a venerable Japanese tradition that dates back at least to the arrival of Commodore Perry and his “Black Ships.”

There are more foreigners in Japan’s future than they were in its past, and unlike Bob Harris in the movie, most of them will not be going home. The country’s success or failure will largely hinge on its ability to engage with the outsiders in its midst. **JS**

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