



When West Marries East

In these times of a world in turbulence, turmoil or tumult, plenty of words to choose from in an attempt to describe life as it is unfolding around the globe today -whether in Japan, Libya, Bahrain, not to forget Africa and even Europe in continuous Euro financial crises, the Muslim immigrant debacle, Latin and South America, floods in Australia and the earthquake disaster in Christchurch New Zealand, global warming, the economy, the stock market, just name it, I find it difficult to join the i-reporters, instant messaging the latest developments in Japan... in short...on Twitter or other social networks. Rather I prefer to write more lengthy newsletters 'When West Marries East' and I failed you this year on Valentine's Day. That was not just the passing away of my mother on January the 11th you will appreciate. The breaking news of the Tohoku Earthquake, the subsequent Tsunami and Fukushima's nuclear power plant disaster, now four weeks ago and probably overshadowed by other news shows taking the lime light ... Here then the sketchy personal account of what was news from nowhere...

March 11, 17:51 From my wife's company computer:

Mobile call / SMS didn't work.

How can we get back home?

Nongkie

17:53 Answer from my client's company computer to her:

RE: Stay at business hotel?

Gerrit

11/03 17:59 From Belgium

All ok? Hedwig

20:45 RE

Just sent email reply to your hotmail. Transmission delays, delays...

11/03 20:14 Fabienne from the Netherlands

Gerrit, just received the news of the earthquake. How is your situation? Are you OK?

11/03 20:20 RE:

All is well that ends well

11/03 20:31 from Fabienne:

Good to hear!

11/03 20:45 RE to Fabienne

Thanks for your concern. Started walking home...

11/03 20:55 RE from Fabienne

Tomorrow you'll have blisters!

11/03 21:30

Yeah, one hour and a half in the trek and six hours ahead, not exactly like cycling the roads of old...

----- Original Message -----

From: [hedwig slembrouck <mailto:xxxxxxxxx@hotmail.com>](mailto:hedwig.slembrouck@hotmail.com)

To: [gerritslembrouck <mailto:cml@asahi-net.email.ne.jp>](mailto:gerritslembrouck@cml@asahi-net.email.ne.jp)

Sent: Friday, March 11, 2011 5:48 PM

Subject: aardbeving

Gerrit en Nongkie,

I am just seeing the breaking news of the earthquake in Japan.

Hopefully it is far away from your neck of the woods. Has your wife Nongkie family in the neighbourhood?

Please let us know something very soon.

grtjs H.

From: cml@asahi-net.email.ne.jp

To: xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx@hotmail.com

Date: Fri, 11 Mar 2011 19:31:26 +0900

Subject: Re: aardbeving

Well, we're in the middle of continuous aftershocks, one after the other some 5-10 min apart, some stronger some more violent. Feels like the epicenter is just around the corner. Computer could crash, more later!

G&N

PS Not very reassuring, but we're OK

Never in my 20 years in Japan have I experienced anything alike. When the first trembles started, I was joking to the other employees: "jishin no ryoku ga nan-do desho ka, 3.2 - 3.3 - 3.4 counting the strength on the Richter scale stopped after that. It just became stronger and more violent. Staff ducked under their desks; get out, it flashed through my mind. The balcony window, looking out: already full of people looking up for falling debris.

No, I wouldn't survive a jump from this third floor. Looking at the concrete balcony above, when would it be collapsing? Out to the emergency back staircase then, leaving the sliding window open, they get stuck when out of angle. To the roof? All sorts of debris was falling down in the narrow spaces between the high-rises, can't see where it's coming off or from in this mostly 10 floor office building area. Then down onto the street. Black with people already. Why don't they move on to a more open space? What if a facade tumbles? Right, the park nearby had been cordoned off for subway construction work. Then to the 4 lane main avenue. Equally crowded, all traffic had come to a standstill.

Seemed like everybody was waiting for the next quake to start. No! They were standing in line to get into convenience stores and business hotels! Back to the office then. Then suddenly a waterfall gushed the facade of a love hotel, how funny! The water tank on the roof must have cracked; a pretty wet crack. Some people got a free love shower! While the General Manager bought wine, beer and snacks I went back to the office.

There I stood unstable on my feet, like getting off the boat in Tokyo Bay, back from the Ogasawara Islands after 30 hours on rough seas. Colleagues were cheerfully cracking jokes; I stood by a bit confused.

The computers on the network!

What if electricity falls out? Data loss? I started closing all programs and left them on standby. Again a major tremor, stronger than previous aftershocks but not as long, strong and short. It was now past 5 pm and soon office hours would be over. Just check e-mail again then. What do you know, they poured in from all our business partners in the UK, New Zealand and Australia in that order. Well then, answer the Ō mimai expressions of sympathy and concern immediately, and in between drop a quick couple of lines to family and friends via Asahi-net webmail. Every now and then aftershocks continued. Three hours of insecurity and more uncertainty to come, how was I going to get home? Then reports came in of explosions in Tokyo harbor.

Gas or petroleum tanks?

All trains had stopped. No surprise really, who would expect they'd run the risk derailing, apart then from possible head-on collisions because of signal failures? Nongkie as a Japanese had talked about such natural disaster situations sometimes, it goes without saying. What if? Now nothing more to consider. This is it! With hotels still standing and some still operational clear minded businessmen had booked hotel rooms in no time, especially the ones close to the station, one more option crossed.

Bus or Taxi home? Taxis if available would cost me 200 Euro I knew of Bonenkai (notorious end-of-year parties) from which the boss send me home prepaid. I only know long distance busses out of this part of the city heading North, not West were we belong. Nongkie text messaged me that if no train was going by 22:00 she would stay overnight at her company or hotel nearby. She works in a city close to Saitama Prefecture, so away from the mega polis of Tokyo. Hey, SMS worked again, though not instant messaging, 30 min delay...

I replied: "by 8 pm I would start walking home". So I set out on the app. 40 km walk.

Coming out of the office building and onto the main four lane avenue I saw lines of people trying to get a bus out of the city. A hundred or more meters on both sides of the sidewalks, in rows of 4 and more, people and people, black of people and a foreigner like me topping the wave with his silver-grey hair...

I looked into a convenience store and all shelves were simply empty. No sushi, no sandwiches or other pre-prepared food, only potato chips and other snacks available. Small supermarket customers fared no better, all sold out!

I had started my foolhardy journey on foot back home. Reckoning app. 40 km at 5 km/hour: 8 hours!

I knew the way, approximately that is, to Shinjuku from Ikebukuro I had done ten years ago with some Waseda University students and from Shinjuku along the Route 20 on my road racer bicycle to a Zazen meeting just a year ago. Can't go wrong, now would it? I just had to follow the thick stream of people walking along Meijiro Dori leading to the neighborhood where my wife grew up. I stopped by a convenience store to buy some provisions: a pack of mixed nuts and of course a cup of Ozeki rice wine Sake to keep warm. You never know, my long heavy leather coat would probably keep the cold out but inside it?

Soon I hooked up with a walking partner, a Chinese woman from Shanghai I learned. As I had been to Shanghai I hoped to exchange experiences. Unfortunately her Japanese was not up to the level to explore this and after one hour she turned off. I reflected on the conversation, she had already walked four hours and I considered dropping the weight of my business briefcase. There, familiar sky scrapers at Shinjuku Station ahead.

There must be a locker where I can deposit my briefcase that with an 800 gram hand-held Hewlett Packard Win.CE computer from 2001, plus the Homo Americanus book: Child of the Postmodern Age by Tomislav Sunic a former US Professor and numerous other filed papers, it all was going to be weighing on the long run.

Considering Shinjuku is one of the four major mass transit stations in Tokyo, all flushing some 2 million people in the rush hours, that's about half of the population of Denmark... surely there would be an empty locker before midnight, no? But 100 Yen coins lacked when finding one. A foreigner passed by, any change for a 5000 Yen bill? He hadn't but suggested we change a thousand at a vending machine. The Irish man by his accent not only gave me the necessary coins but also bought me an energy drink with the words: you'll need it! Few words do have that intrinsic meaning needing no comment, thanks very much indeed. Luck follows the foolhardy?

Now I just followed the stream of people walking on one of the main arteries out of the city and when my bladder signaled it was going over capacity, again lucky me: a neat toilet at a small playground park besides the road.

By 23:00 it got markedly colder on my face, the Russian fur hat, gloves and leather coat notwithstanding. I bought another cup of Sake with o-tsumami snack, nuts for me again. I wondered what these salary-men walking in a business suit only would keep warm on.

A text message from Nongkie came in, telling she could take the Seibu Line and get close to home, walk from there but that train line was a way out of my reach I replied, feeling a bit let down by my earlier perceived way to go... Perhaps I could reach the Friday night watering hole in Kokubunji instead. That's where ex-pats probably would be drinking like there was no tomorrow. I could brush up on my Dutch with the owners from Holland; Branden and Jinen san the Bonze might even be there. Playing with this vision didn't last long.

The reality was surely more than 2 hours walk away and my left ankle started protesting severely despite the tight ankle supporter that I had bought before setting out on this journey home. Then it could very well be that the numbing effect of Sake alcohol was wearing off. Another intake of Ozeki one cup and nuts at the next convenience store did not level off the growing pain. The next convenience store in sight?

By 01:30 the biceps of my thighs were now also signaling they had enough. With no more people walking the extra mile, time to consider my options. Hitchhike of course! Why didn't I come to think of that before? Still enough cars on the road to try my luck! Japanese drivers however wouldn't pull over just anywhere. At the traffic light perhaps, yes. Sitting there on the bar of the guard rail at one side of the zebra crossing with thumb up my spirits lifted. What a luxury! Soon I would be sitting warm in a car on the way to Chōfu city and hopefully even further. I put my Sunday's best smile on and energetically signaled: a ride please? Time passed. Making my white shirt collar and tie more visible, taking of the one glove would certainly help, but it didn't. My Russian fur hat then? No damn it, it was made in Japan! Nothing wrong with my appearance was there? Only this foreigner hitchhiking in the dead of the night, I guess. But didn't they understand? This is a national disaster, aren't people supposed to help each other out? Change tactics, bang on the window of cars waiting for the traffic light to turn green and shout Chofu?

With the driver behind the wheel on the right side and me on the left side of the road I picked only those with empty passenger seats, but one oughtn't to be too choosy. Needn't be a limousine, a lorry truck would do as long as they didn't put me in the loading platform behind. All to no avail, they mostly signaled a direction right bend.

Was there a split further up? Visualizing the cycling map didn't work. Find out, start walking again. Ah, a Police Koban! I entered the police box and asked: "Chōfu, how far?" On foot may be half an hour was the reply, no further questions asked. Dōmo arigatō gozaimasu I thanked in the full long version as appropriate.

I set out to reach Chōfu Station in the estimated time but was the information just for not discouraging me? On and on it went, how long had I walked now? 15min? not more? Again I needed an excusable leak, but no latrine around. A dark side street would do and then feeling relieved on we go. Just walk, like the Bonze Jinen san whose nocturnal marathon walk story to his temple had impressed me, and yes there the station with operating trains! No doubt in my mind I was getting on and as far or better as close to home as I could get. That was Fuchū. Man, was that a pleasure to ride the train again! Packed with people but warm and I didn't mind standing for 30 min. There was a somber atmosphere though, but well, this was not the usual Friday night train with party salary-men oozing of booze... Just out of Fuchū Station exit the line of hopeful people for taxis lengthened with the new arrivals.

3 am, I called Nongkie, the mobile magic worked! She was glued to the TV watching the first images of the Tsunami and the disastrous aftermath. Still unaware of the bigger picture, I thought the whole world was centered on people trying to get home. There was no structural damage to our apartment building; just a few items had fallen of the shelves but nothing broken. She said just wait your turn for a taxi, no matter how long it takes, nothing I'd argue about.

Every now and then a taxi arrived. Damn it, taking only one person at the time? This was going to take ages. Cold, colder and colder still. Nobody talked, standing there tripping on the spot, one hour passed, light another fag? Taxis sporadically arrived one every 5 eternities or so. One and a half hour had passed ... then I heard anyone for Tachikawa? I jumped the line with 20 people, at least, and shared a taxi with three. Being the last one to be dropped off at 30 Euro was the deal of the day! I arrived home at 5:30 in the morning.

That was a tedious account of how to get home after an earthquake. When are men going to listen to their woman's intuition instead of foolhardily going their way? Or shouldn't I generalize and believe it is only valid in my case? If men don't listen and women can't read maps how are Mars and Venus doing in bed then?



Red line: 6.5 hour walk
 Yellow line: 30 min. train
 Purple line: 1 hour taxi
 Dark Orange line: Nongkie cycled to work in 2 hours.

Here then, a week later, one more tedious account of life in Japan, as seen from Tokyo Metropolis that is.

Life under the circumstances starts feeling normal this Friday morning. Can't get to a client by train, that's 5 days now. OK, but I can go hunting for food. The supermarket was closed yesterday, every day more earthquake aftershocks, rolling EI blackouts... meager food supplies, other reasons may have caused it shuttered. Who cares and asks why? It's a fact of life, and we move on, we don't belong to the culture of criticism, do we? Trying again this morning at opening time, bingo! From a distance I could see more bicycles than I could quickly count. Had it opened earlier? No people standing in line? Right, now I could see them all inside. Japanese are known for hoarding, so I'd better do my share.

No shopping carts left but luckily we have baskets to fill to the rim, 2 liters milk -only 10 tetra packs left, morning bread for Nongkie, she doesn't have Japanese style breakfast with rice and miso soup, and so it went on. Lines started in front of the cashiers. I calculated on the clock on the wall, it was 10:15 am; the train to this afternoon's work was 11:42 better start queuing now. Which of the 7 cashiers was going faster? I choose the line in front of cashier 5; there I could possibly grab some cans with canned foreign foods, sardines, asparagus... Indeed well calculated, 35 min. cueing, and I proudly SMS messaged Nongkie I had made a good catch to take home, 10 liters of Reverse Osmosis treated water included. Unfortunately the 11:42 train was no longer available. Trains had stopped at 11:30... Back home again, get on Nongkie's mama-chari, the Japanese term for a mother's bicycle doubling as kids transport and shopping bicycle, and get to another station from where I could get to work. Japan is not built around town halls and churches; its centre is the train station! Temples are usually located off the beaten track, a refuge from worldly life. I made it to work as usual just at 13:30. If trains can't run on time some people can!

In my break from computer network maintenance, I called an English friend made here 14 years ago. He was frenzied. Now in Osaka waiting for a flight out of Japan, making use of the British Government's offer of support to get their citizens out. There was the nuclear power plant at Fukushima scare with imminent radiation danger. I was stunned. I remember my first Belgian passport that stated: When traveling abroad the state does not take responsibility for repatriation, in other words you're on your own. What the heck, is that what life is all about? Opportunism? I guess that's why I have a Danish nationality now. Sure, some foreign residents have a career to consider and they can pursue that just like my old time friend now in Bahrain when you're connected. The British Council that he is working for moved him out of the troubled area where reports of killings in anti-government demonstrations are making world headline news... Every time he moves on to a new workplace whether it be Colombo in Sri Lanka or Bangkok he finds himself in the midst of uprisings.

As for me, now all the rats have jumped ship and Japan has sunk only 75 cm, I'm happy to be here among people who do not go looting. I can even leave my fully loaded bicycle with food unattended while filling the 5 liter jerry cans with RO water. I must add that the times are changing though. Years ago it did not come to mind locking the bicycle. It was customary even to go out without locking the front door. Now we have security cameras installed to keep an eye on Chinese Triads. Nevertheless, I am so happy to hear people being even friendlier than usual to me now. The people in the neighborhood greet more often on the street, in train stations when asking for information, wherever I go I have only to praise these Orientals for their resigned attitude. I can go on and on with praising my host country, though as always there is a flip side (or a price to pay?). CNN was the first one to put a price tag on the disaster. I'm tired of hearing the number of 'causalities' a word I dislike, such an abstracted concept to tell it straight forward: died, dead. And why do Japanese keep on asking me: "Are you going back to your home country?" What shall I answer? What do you mean? My cave in the Himalayas? I realize, this is not my home country, but I made my home in Japan and I feel confident in living my life out here. I have my place reserved where the urn with my ashes will be set into the Ezo family tomb. Somber thoughts as may be, it is part of life in Japan...

The second half working day this week went fast. After some email correspondence with the UK, New Zealand and Australia, time to decide when to say: "Dja, kyo wa kono hen de" (let's call it a day). I left, no minute overwork, expressing properly "Ō sakki ni shitsurei shimasu" or apologies for leaving before you.

Again I chose to return the routine route of old. Yesterday was lucky when I got stuck with no more trains continuing good $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way back home, I guessed right when taking a 30 min bus to another train line.

And who doesn't want to repeat the good luck? What took 2,5 hours yesterday, could only take 2 today, so expectations are of course to see that back to the 1,5 h and trains just like people can run on time...

That the trains aren't heated anymore is OK with me even when that means cold toes. Now I remember the comfort so much better, the heating under the seats make you feel like soaking in Ōfuro, the Japanese bath. You can comfortably doze off like in a mother's womb. In day time there are no lights on inside the carriages and when the train pulls in a station it feels like being sucked in a black hole. We all must consider electricity consumption, and nobody ever mentions that in stations only 50% of the lights are on, which is an eerie feeling as after doomsday when the third world war was lost.

I wondered whether the blackout was going to be implemented like yesterday, Thursday. That evening we had a scheduled blackout for 3 hours. Finally the candles that my mother had sent in the early days of my return to Japan were useful. I lit 5 of them. Two in the Kitchen, one in the living room and two in my working room. True, it is uncanny looking out of the black window and everything is pitch dark; nothing to do but sit it out.

With a blackout in our Group 3 zone, Nongkie had set out to work on her bicycle that morning. With the Google map showing the path along Tama Gawa Josui canal that was dug out by hand back in February 1653 to irrigate the rice paddies and provide fresh water for the Sake breweries she had reached her company close to Saitama Prefecture north-west of Tokyo in two hours. I was impressed, but now back again?

On the corridor out of our front door I glared empty eyed on policemen guiding the traffic with whistles and red lit batons. Nongkie was going to cycle through a blacked out zone I realized. I SMS messaged her asking where she was. Promptly the answer came. Ogawa! Right, in a blackout and not even half way. What if she fell, had a punctured tire? I reckoned staying close to the railroad and populated areas would be better than following the Google map with short cuts along Tama Josui Canal and through the fields with horticulture that I had printed off. I'd cycled it many times but not under these circumstances. I texted her the idea with Ganbatte kudasai, encouragement! One hour went, no response. My SMS had been sent all right but received?

I called, - ru-suban, please leave your message. Where are you now? Call me!

I went out again pacing up and down the front corridor. Already past 8 pm, that's more than the two hours it took her to work. I watched the road below, a policeman's whistle waving an occasional car through, headlights shining through the dark cold. Go back inside and risk missing a call when relays possibly were out of order?

I have lived most of my life in uncertainty and even today job insecurity, accustomed to the idea of being insignificant that sometimes bounces to the other extreme of self-importance, but this is different. Nongkie my dear, love of my life, where are you? Are we seeing the American dream turn into the American nightmare here? Rhetorical visions of the promised land, of democracy and prosperity with globalization? There is no way to turn the clock back, is there? We follow the events as they occur in an ever escalating speed and scope.

My mobile telephone rang, yes! Haijima? So close? OK, CU soon then. What a relief when she finally entered the door. A long lasting embrace, yes!

Two weeks have passed now and I am saturated with TV news of the calamity.

We have yet to see any foreign media reports, but I understand from accessing Facebook there is a lot of hype out there and disaster tourist journalism is at an all time high. I acknowledge there is a lot of good will too! And cultural differences are contrasted sharper than ever before. Many Japanese do not feel inclined to talk to me about the tragedy. There is a sense of shame for the misfortune and inconvenience that I may have to put up with.

While aftershocks continue unabated and I get jumpy at the least of any shrieking sounds that could indicate the next one, coming Saturday the first weak sign of much delayed spring is in the weather forecast, so I'll prepare the road bicycles for the start of the cycling season while Nongkie is going to ship rice and other food supplies again to our friends in the disaster region. We just have received confirmation of the last of five being alive in Iwate Prefecture, but with nothing but the clothes on his back. It is hard to believe that the reality of the memories we have of visiting them there in beautiful Tohoku is wiped of the map. Only pictures remain, see them at:

<https://picasaweb.google.com/gls.lingua/Tohoku#slideshow/5197975436703290450>

Saturday had indeed the smell of 'kafun' cedar pollen in the air. Irresistible I was drawn outside. While polishing the spokes of the wheels shiny my neighbor of the 7th floor came to talk. Feel like cycling tomorrow?

I was a bit hesitant in jumping on the invitation, trying to excuse the poor shape I was in after a winter with no cycling at all. But then I couldn't escape when he had heard my nocturnal walk back home after the earthquake. Still, I know he is 20 years younger my age and one of those guys that run 70 km mountain trails in 9 hours. Remembering the great times we had on previous trips, I accepted: "dja, ashita jū-ji ni ikimashō" all right, 10 o'clock tomorrow morning, let's go. I just had to buy new brake shoes and replace the old ones that had burned off pretty much on last year's high speed descends.

How wonderful it is to get away from it all! Or is it? Perhaps I was going to expose myself to a super X-ray dose in the mountains. I did not give it much further thought once we were in the saddle.

Kosaka san is really a nice guy, he talks uncomplicated Japanese to me and lets me cycle at my own pace. I did remember the short cut road through the fields to the mountains that he had taken me on a couple of times. In fact I had cycled the narrow road into the mountains where we were heading now, but never turned off the beaten track. The idea of steep climbing worried me a little. I am not a good climber on the bicycle, downhill I love much more! The first 20 km went fine in just under one hour, the next three standing on the pedals to keep going was more demanding, then came the surprise. 12% uphill for the next 7 km to the 'Nokogiri Toge' mountain pass. Kosaka san showed that zig-zagging the narrow road helped so I needn't walk all the way up.

Breaks became more frequent, but who minds? Stunning panorama views of the steep valley below and wild unspoiled nature all around! Here and there Japanese nightingales welcomed us with a melodious song. I only once saw the shy bird, and that was in Belgium, in the Antwerp Zoo!

Debris of rocks scattered on the road after the earthquake was a risk for punctures that I had taken into account and had spare tubes and tools with me to fix possible damage.

We reached the top shortly after 4 pm, leftovers of snow on both sides of the road and icy patches on it too. Not much time left now before it is going to be a dark and cold descend. With an average of 30 km/h on the way back we made it home by 5:30 pm what a grand day out!



Photo taken at 'Here' the Nokogiri Toge Mountain pass in the red circle

See the whole trip with 29 pictures placed on the interactive map here:

http://www.everytrail.com/view_trip.php?trip_id=1007556

Cheers,

Gerrit Slembrouck

Back to main page cycling: <http://www.ne.jp/asahi/clover/multi-lingual/cycling.htm>