

When West Marries East,

The honey moon is over

Unbridled but not unplugged

Winter is on the retreat and spring is in the air, I ride past the postcard perfect picture that I wrote about in my earliest newsletter from Japan, the one with the pine tree leaning over the Tamagawa Josui canal irrigating the rice paddies, with ducks paddling beneath, the view of grey and varicoloured carps distorted by the silvery ripples on the surface and nostalgia sets in.

For the past 20 years I've set out to work by train, with the Chuo Line or the central contrivance for salary toiling commuters living in the Tama area west of Tokyo and shortly after leaving Ushihama station the train passes this view, while I know my wife passed earlier and she looks the other way, upstream to where Mt Fuji peeks over the mountain range on clear days. I never asked her why, nor did she ask me when I told her. Only recently I started asking what she would like for dinner on Wednesday, my cooking day.

She never asked me what food I like, no need, I just love her cooking whatever Japanese comes on the table. But she noticed some particular likes that I have and always makes sure it is in house and I hear her mind silently thinking 'available'. Value the small and you'll treasure the big. In doing house chores too we each found those naturally, regardless of the culturally defined areas that are typically a man's or a woman's. More than once I poke fun at women when telling that I find ironing squatted on Tatami mats in our Japanese room relaxing. I know they find it a woman's job exclusively, but I say they are my white shirts, my seedy suit pants to press the crease in -don't touch- and then they shyly giggle because they do not touch anything that is strictly the man's home turf. In that way my wife is very very Japanese, my ashtrays filled with butts are the nails in my coffin, my working room is almost a no-go zone. All is mostly understood without saying. And then -all things considered- what's the point in needing to question all and everything, compare, finding and defining the differences when knowing no moment in time is identical.

This moment is painful though. I see the empty space where the leaning pine tree is cut down. My last undying memory will be the white heron watchfully prey for fish, frogs or whatever edible in the clear water stream. Never again will I be able to shoot this scenery. Never again will I leave my wife a message of gratefulness on its wrought branch. I'll have to start looking to the other side, turn my face away from the ugly empty space. That's common in Japan, people feel attracted to beauty and are able to ignore the ugly, just turn your head away and it's not there to spoil the pleasurable.

Ostrich philosophy I remarked in an earlier newsletter but not quite in the same mood.

Many a visitor to Japan will be moved by the scenic beauty and perhaps recognizes some classic art expressions on scrolls in Indian ink or was it Chinese ink? If not a temple bell is audible in the vicinity or the scent of incense is oozing mystique then surely the visually laudable will lift you to the seventh heaven, and there's a lot to fall in love with in between.

These slit-eyed Orientals that smile and talk at the same time, steeped in the deepest of traditions but continually shifting fads and fashions, Japan is full of stark contradictions even punks politely queue to get on the train. Whether it's the remarkable bit of science that Furukawa Takeji developed to allow character description by blood type, the culture in which morning is 'Go-Zen' and evening is go 'Go-Go', the scenery of architecture in wood or steel, bonsai techniques among other wiring and support devices to shape garden conifers so that any casual visitor is invited to contemplate Oriental mysticism, a grumbling stomach will timely remind of what we all have in common: the need for air to breathe and water to drink, to keep warm when it's cold, cool when it's too hot and a cover over our head when it rains cats and dogs, a companion is already a luxury if not a problem and what is learned in the cradle is carried to the grave. So what about food then?

No problem, there is always a McDonalds just around every corner, but love it or hate it like me, you'll want to try some of the local produce if you haven't already in your home country. You can try a kaiten-zushi bar, you sit round a conveyor belt and pick plates of cooked vinegared rice and a topping of sliced raw fish draped over the oblong mound pressed between the palms- you generally pay per plate eaten. Or go to an Izakaya (Japanese Pub), they often offer tabehodai or nomihodai - for a set price you get an hour or two to eat or drink as much as you like. Feeling adventurous you could try natto, a sticky and slightly smelly concoction made of fermented soya beans. In a worst case scenario I imagine you can always buy a lunch box, a pack of sandwiches or fresh salad at a 'Konbini' a convenience store and take it to your hotel room. That's what I hear Japanese do abroad in this situation when traveling individually -mostly you will see them in hordes driven by a schedule of Europe in 5 days. But you'll probably need one Japanese person to accompany you to a more upscale traditional Japanese restaurant, that's what I'm telling visitors on business from New Zealand, Australia or the UK when after the late afternoon meeting dinner comes into question.

Quite many years ago there was a time I remember when 'Understanding Cultural Differences' and 'Cross-cultural Communications' was the catch phrase and integrated part of every Business English curriculum; reading up on it a must for professionals. Indeed, not all personal experiences can be translated into universally applicable knowledge. Preparing Japanese business men to life and work in the EU needs a broader perspective. The biggest difference is strangely enough teaching others to be aware of and question certain aspects of cultural differences in theory but fail to recognize or worse refuse to acknowledge that it does also applies to me, old 60s guy stuck in a Japanese corporate culture environment that will always see me as outsider, not one of them and yet teacher of them. Would I have preferred washing up on the shores of SE Asia after years of drifting rudderless around on high seas?

After the first period called honey moon, in which the 'other' culture is perceived as exceedingly positive, so very many aspects to fall in love with, culture shock symptoms occur; proportional to the expected time that one is to spend abroad, that is not returning to one's home country. The reverse culture shock is when returning to one's origins after a long time of absence.

Or in other words being caught up between the two, sleeping problems, loss of appetite and energy, and so many more variables play a role in triggering home sickness and depression in the wake will more likely occur earlier when on a planned three year residence abroad and easier to deal with than say when you've left indefinitely or have gone without giving thought to ever returning. Then they could start manifesting themselves after seven years, it is said. That's when Human Metabolism & The Krebs Cycle make full circle.

If not recognized and treated the text book claims then ultimately suicidal drives set in - but 30.000 jumpers a year shoveled under your nose on TV news, whether off the roof or under the train, all appetite for this exit is forever gone once you've seen it with your own eyes

and that I did. I wrote about seeing the head of a stereotype salary-man rolling 'off the beaten railroad track' in an old newsletter and will not repeat describing the vomiting reaction here.

The large scale survey of national cultures that Geert Hofstede compiled after a 10 year period of research tells us that there are five dimensions of cross-cultural differences, five ways to define a culture.

In brief, Power distance; Uncertainty avoidance; Individualism versus collectivism; Masculinity versus femininity; Time orientation. With each their subdivisions, better take the bull by the horns...

Large versus Small Power Distance

Ever questioned the extent to which power is distributed equally within a society and the degree that society accepts this distribution? Of course you are aware of the high power distance between the elite and the populace, the hierarchical bureaucracies even when these have been kept in a dreary gray zone for as long as we remember, and now that strong leaders take the stage in Davos and command a high regard for clued-up authority, the low power distance favouring personal responsibility and autonomy is what we like to hear.

Hofstede's Power Distance Index measures the extent to which the less powerful members of organizations and institutions (like the family) accept and expect that power is distributed unequally. This represents inequality (more versus less), but defined from below, not from above. It suggests that a society's level of inequality is endorsed by the followers as much as by the leaders. True?

Around the turn of the century, I had still not understood that I was not in control but rather that the world around controlled me. With the advance of computer technology and the Internet I felt like having arrived in a new era of worldwide hippydom and I was once again mainstream. Alas, too late did I realize I was working myself up for the greater good, for the advancement of the companies, for opening opportunities to better people's lives and faithful to the Buddhist precept of acting without any thought on expectations for returns a strange sense of being exploited arose. You would of course question what the cause of this sensation might be, conceivably of my own making. Does not the slave make the master? Was it not the result of my own toiling slave attitude, trying to please the master? Was I expecting to be praised for the hard work perhaps, or thanked for the good work, receive recognition? Rise to a higher social status with payment according skills and competence? None of this was particularly applicable to me, I felt. I got my raises in recompense all right, without having to bring it up, let alone negotiate. Top paid teaching jobs, and for a free-lance position working without contract pay above the average, a bonus twice a year that a PT office worker could only dream of! So what to complain about? Probably good enough is never enough for me. Can't just rest on old laurels, now can you?

Can I still comfort myself with collecting the crumbs that fall from the rich man's table? Can I be choosy?

The distance between the ones in real power -meaning juggling around with the big money- and the work force is larger here than you'd expect. 12 million people in Tokyo at the mercy of Wall Street! Then there is the language barrier of course. I'm after all not Japanese and in this corporate culture you would want to blame all and everything on their non-American promised land- attitude. Where in the world do you find big companies that have a division with foreign staff entirely isolated from the Natives? I would need to narrow that down to the companies and to fields that I know of; in foreign language training and translation. At the top of my teaching career, literally on the 33rd floor in the Skyscraper district of Shinjuku, I let myself be bullied beyond recognition. Having lost face a comeback without face a few years later failed miserably. But I also assist smaller Japanese companies with international communications and translations Jp-En where I am the only foreign staff and only Japanese is spoken.

In the longest prevailing line of business in my life I deal with cases of Japanese dropout students, those for some reason or another could not conform to the educational system and norms that society sets them. With the financial support of their affluent but often desperate parents they get a second chance abroad. At the agency, one of my oldest clients, there are very many success stories. My mind however go out to those losers who were unable to make it overseas, and what has become of them. But as predictable those figures are not alluring statistics in marketing. So if your company is doing well, you are doing well that is of course if your identity or name card says Sony, Hitachi or any big name like Mitsui Sumitomo. Even when it says like one of mine: Waseda Study Overseas Centre, International General Affairs Manager, I'd rather be a big fish in a small pond than a small fish in a big pond.

What a small world when knowing that the first wife of the founder of the prestigious Waseda University was Ezo Mito. My wife has traced her Ezo family tree back to the 17th century now and there is a lot of fallen from grace in its history and shame to overcome too. In fact I'm a loafer myself, dropout from schooling in Tibetan Buddhism imported by the West, now that I returned to the Buddhist land of the rising sun, my ever so long lasting wish being fulfilled since it did not work out for me in the West, can I now with conviction say that I'm walking on clouds in the seventh heaven?

Success is attractive, and is eagerly exploited as with so many of our modern day desires for happiness and success. Which comes first or which is the result of the other? It seems that most successful people were happy and have a sanguine nature to start with. Happiness does not necessarily result from success, or does it? Happiness for sale is not advertised as such. What about 'Power' then? Disguised in a buoyant image of PC Tools it is, and my computer consumerism on honey moon is over.

Empower the people, power to the people, freedom and democracy the deceitful slogan of these days, soon will have to be replaced by a new catch phrase! While the successful people reach levels of power to direct the future it seems, who or what is ultimately in control remains unanswered. Politicians get elected on promising the people what they want to have, but what if the people want the kind of things that ultimately are destroying our living environment on this planet? If no religion, philosophy or ideology is able to make full circle we could feed it to the latest and world Nr.1 Japanese super computer that became operational in June 2011.

The K-Computer that draws upon the Japanese word "Kei" for 10^{16} (ten quadrillions), representing the system's performance goal of 10 petaflops. If that doesn't say it ok, how about more than 8 quadrillion calculations per second (petaflop/s)? The K Computer is also more powerful than the next five systems on the list of the TOP500 combined. Fujitsu outperforming team work of the Chinese on second place? Beats me! But then again, how many brains of how many Think Tanks would it need to outshine that?

Power Distance Index (PDI)

On the scale from 0-100 Japan ranks 54

Uncertainty avoidance

Something that ambiguous and unclear because it can be understood in more than one way and you're right when applying it personally in your neck of the woods! You must agree that I need to admit the cultural differences are finally creeping under my skin, dealing with this society's tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity, but at the same time it ultimately refers to man's search for 'Truth'.

Reportedly, the degree to which individuals require set boundaries and clear structures in a high uncertainty culture allows individuals to cope better with risk and innovation whereas in a low uncertainty culture it emphasizes a higher level of standardization and greater job security, it is said. Japan would definitely lie on the low uncertainty end of cultures.

The simplest definition of being Japanese is to be born in Japan, to be of Japanese parents, to live in Japan and to speak Japanese. A person is Japanese not only because of carrying a Japanese passport, but because he or she is an active participant in relationships with dearly drawn lines of responsibility and loyalty. When Japanese travel abroad, they cross not only a geographical border but also a social boundary. Membership in Japanese society is mandated not by behavior or belief but by active presence and participation in the social network –a constant maintenance of the predictable obligations and interactions that make up group membership. When Japanese leave Japan, their membership is suspended. Every year they are away, re-entry as members of the group, re-establishment of relationships to the satisfaction of these at home –becomes more difficult. The strictness with which Japanese boundaries are laid down stems in part from a long cultural tradition of inside-outside (uchi-soto) distinctions surrounding the use of space and the demarcation of borders. This even reflects in the Kei-go language of business: do I use the phrase ending *Gerrito Surenburuku to mo imasu* or *desukedo* when calling a company to tell I will be delayed.

All according mind set people react in different ways, I for example would hardly be influenced by memories of advice like: follow teachers that you like, have a bond of attraction with. At the end of the day, I feel more like taking up the duty of responding to whatever comes along, almost like doing the American 'Do the right thing'. But questionable here is what the right thing to do is. In Japan there is a way of doing things, all pretty neatly set out for you. One wouldn't question why at the entrance you take off your shoes, the houses are built with this in mind. Slippers awaiting any number of visitors, we have about 5-6 pairs... On the train you put your briefcase on your lap. The linoleum floor although spick-and-span clean is considered low dirty, only touched by shoe soles. One picks up a stick of gum fallen on the floor, but never takes the paper cover off to consume it, instead it goes into the garbage pocket. I, 'yaban-jin' barbarian uncivilized foreigner of course put my briefcase on the floor without a shred of doubt.

Last when I drove with the my neighbor to a home centre shopping mall to buy a laundry rack and after the customary exchanges of information about how old I am, making it easy with Showa year 24 and hearing he is 17 years younger my age, his research job at the Tohoku University and his passion for BMW technology, I mentioned my problem with not finding a gas table with 4 burners in Japan. That raised eyebrows. I explained how troublesome it is when I cook, juggling around 4 pots on three burners, one for potatoes, one for the vegetables, one for frying meat and one for the sauce. He just replied 3 burners are the country's standard, adding that when he worked in Brazil there the standard is 6 burners. When I received no answer as to why they need 6, but sensed that 3 are the Japanese standard that shouldn't be questioned or criticized, I realized everyone have an electric rice cooker here and a small fish oven below the 3 gas burner, and that is all you need for a standard Japanese meal. The renovation of our apartment building now under way is a marvelous piece of organization and management, starting with scaffolding all of the stages on the time table are strictly adhered to. Workmen do not recoil from a windy day with sherbet snow and if freezing weather makes it impossible to work, they'll make up for it on a Sunday if need to be. How does one realistically measure, evaluate quality of life in this part of world? According purchasing power? The 2.500 Yen foldable laundry pole with two levels of star shaped arms to hang up towels and underwear in between as is customary, keeping women lingerie out of sight from prying eyes; it was nowhere to be found anymore. 10 years later replaced by a cheaper material laundry rack Made in China but costing the double, I almost went ballistic. That probably prevented asking my neighbor about quality of life, in terms of the number of paid holidays, career opportunities and achievements. We continued a fairly flat conversation half in Japanese and English. I could help reflecting on the life style of shoppers, where they all fairly remunerated and regardless of recognition or acknowledgement? Other cultures would envy the ease of divorce as quality of life perhaps. Actually that is pretty easy here. Just like you go to town hall to hand in the form of registration declaring yourself as husband and wife you can do the same for divorce. Of course when there is no mutual consent that's where it can get complicated. Financial reasons are usually the stumbling block and the hairy days in the aftermath of the common law of dividing all equally 50/50 are a minor hiccup on the way to a life totally shunned and cut off from all previous social relationships. You're a pariah now.

Tackling uncertainty avoidance, what do you feel intuitively is the right thing to do, what's your gut feeling? Follow up on your mind altered vision, or discard it all together leaving spontaneity to the place and moment? Stick to perceived visions and carry them out without letting further reasoning change your course of action? And once more, when receiving good clarification on these matters, taking them to heart: do what you want, do not doubt, do not regret, will they prove to be everlasting cross cultural passe-partouts? Some people have that natural spontaneity indeed, striking and powerfully straight. I met quite a number of them, shooting a picture with an opportune angle and providential timing, sharing their views in unpretentious one-story-a-week writing or simply spent their public-figure time on activism and posting links to bring awareness to the unjust in cyber space.

What if your container doesn't seem to have a bottom? All that is poured in of wise words just goes down the drain and yourself along with it; the baby with the bath water? Having been explained that Japanese people avoiding me on social gatherings where I am the only foreigner present is not because I am a foreigner but rather that they do not risk embarrassing me should I not speak adequate Japanese or they do not risk losing their face not speaking near-native English. The resulting feeling remains all the same; isolation, desperation, segregation, desolation, devastation, purposelessness, meaninglessness, emptiness...

No self perception, no labels, no reasoning, how extraordinary this upright sitting sensation, immovably still, not even breathing as the focus of awareness. Empty of identity, no identification with any form of divine or deity, it is filled to the brim, self contained without other; it must have been the delusion of no-self. How many times have I felt I need a complete overhaul of my nerve system? But rewiring is not something for tomorrow; medical science has just arrived at their first clinical trials of repairing spinal cord injuries while DNA designed babies are already produced for treating the genetic disorder of siblings with freshly harvested bone marrow transplants. The boundaries are pushed over the limit, where uncertainty is unavoidable.

The loss of the GZN website management hit me harder than my mother's passing away. Did I not see it coming? But I did! Actually from the very start. In the 3 months of setting the website up, how many times have I felt no more, no thanks, I don't want to get paid for allowing to be kicked around like that. Believe it or not delivering the product as requested – I claimed being good at following instructions when sending in the tender for the job- affected me to such an extent that even at the most routine jobs I had lost all confidence, all self esteem, doubting just about all and everything I was doing, such a rehearsal of not being competent, incapable of performing, impotent, worthless, reduced to carrying out a job like a machine technician, insignificant -in the name of business disconnected from Buddhist philosophy? OK, did it help me? I guess so, after the final knock-out blow to my blown up ego, my pride still hurting, it changed my attitude, wishing not to rely on the ultimate and absolute truths, benevolent visions of Buddhism that allows you to experience mysticism in blind faith. I had better listen to Clapton's 1968 White Room With Black Curtains Near the Station again. Is it indeed the relative level and the down to earth approach that matters and all the rest is fantasy, really? May be so.

Will these youngsters want to know about where we came from, who cares about the big bang? What we want is more bang for our buck, that's what counts. Youngsters in Japan do not buy Lottery tickets anymore; do not use ear-deafening Pachinko parlors, which is a good thing in my opinion. PlayStation and smart phones to play games on for free, mingling East and West that's the way to go. Only one certainty: where we're heading: forward; even when eyes are focused on the past, time moves you ahead, or so we are told. Nothing lasts; all pleasantries will come to an end if we don't secure ourselves a place in eternal bliss. And these days that can't wait too long. If not in the hall of fame, then in the history e-books because graveyards with stone engraved slats are bulldozed away to make place for the new world order: Bread and Games! We can soon build a Museum of Modern Happiness.

Uncertainty Avoidance is concerned with how a society reacts to the fact that time runs one way and the future is unknown; whether it tries to control the future or let it happen, say that again in the wake of the triple Fukushima nuclear catastrophe.

Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI)
On the scale from 0-100 Japan ranks 92

Individualism versus Collectivism

To which degree do individuals base their actions on self-interest versus the interest of the group? In an individual culture, free will is highly valued. In a collective culture, personal needs are less important than the group's needs. This dimension influences the role government is expected to play in markets. Are we talking Harvard Professor Michael Sandel and Utilitarianism here?

Is Individualism actually opposed to Collectivism? Many individuals are integrated into groups, parishes and party people, fellowships of feminists and football hooligans, cantankerous consumer groups and conscientious conservationists. On every cyber platform you'll find clusters of e-activists and i-reporters. On the collectivism side I found that Danish society in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups and that in my heydays there it seemed to me that the Danes with their social welfare system looking after you from cradle to grave were the ultimate paradigm. In hindsight however 1 in 3 marriages end in divorce and although they do maintain extended families (with birthday parties of kids whose divorced parents have now new partners present with whom they have new kids after bringing with them kids from previous marriages whose mothers and fathers are also present, and Carpe Diem!) but they do certainly not continue protecting uncles, aunts and grandparents in exchange for unquestioning loyalty. On the individualist side I found Nordic societies in which the ties between individuals are brazenly loose: everyone is expected to look after him/herself and his/her immediate family. I guess that's where I am at now, willy-nilly, without compunction.

More than once I heard excuses like "We Japanese are not good at English".

This time it hit harder. I had just come out of the closed-for-the-public show rooms of the Koransha porcelain manufactures in Arita, a small township near Saga city on Kyushu the southern island of the big four on the Nihon Rettō, the Japanese archipelago comprising of 6,852 islands. It was on the second of many trips to my wife's family origins. A party of 10 family members had gathered to tour places of interest in this respect and Koransha was one of them. Ezoe Renzo, their forebear in the Meiji era (1868-1912) and the first licensed tobacco importer of Japan about whom recently a book had been published by Nongkie's research friend Sueoka san, had a personal connection with the founders, the Fukugawa clan. Hence we were welcomed and showed around as VIPs becoming. Standing in line for the customary exchange of name cards, I led eyes on the business card in front. President of a major Japanese Bank, immediately I switched mine, taking out the Waseda one and slipped my personal CMLAS, Jack of all Trades (but master of none) one back into one of the pockets of the leather Meishi holder. What an opposite world. Usually you exchange name cards last in the West, here you do it first. Streamlining with the crowd, I pussyfooted about, admiring the Chinaware the best I could. One room after the other filled to the brink with porcelain of exquisite Japanese floral design mostly in almost cobalt blue color overtones, with tiny spots of red and bordered in gold; Dinnerware sets, Chinese moon flasks, Fonthill vases, Saint-Cloud soft porcelain spitting bowls, the whole lot in line with Royal Copenhagen, Delftware faience or English and French equivalents, impeccably arranged in glass cupboard displays from floor to ceiling all around the four walls, when we arrived in the drawing room, the last room not the first as in the West.

And then being asked to take a seat on the white sheet covered sofa and rustic armchairs? Isn't that white sheet meant to cover rich and delicately woven upholstery or hand-colored natural leather armchairs with deep coil steel springs and feather-filled cushions, as advertised in licorice black interior design magazines - when the room isn't used for longer periods of time? You see that sometimes in movies with a historical theme, but here the spider webs were lacking, not history though. The senior PR Executive who had taken charge of the guided tour pointed the Emperor's chair out, for when he came shopping with Empress Michiko and even invited me to sit there which I politely declined "iie, kekko desu", thinking I'm not wearing the 'emperor's clothes'. Only the intelligent American can see through the trap presented and act with great delight taking the Emperor's Seat. Stupid and ignorant of old Japanese culture as I am, declining means escape, avoiding the subtle mockery of a self-sure Gaijin, a foreigner for whom exists no other. He went on an hourly long lecture in his own historical pace about the Western style oil painted imperial portraits and ochre faded black and white pictures of Koransha dignitaries on the wall and while Sueoka san and Nongkie's family members took handwritten notes of their connections I frantically consulted my Hewlett Packard handheld computer's dictionary Japanese-English.

The first thing on my mind coming out was finding a smoking area to relax from the time travel and come to my senses. Standing ablated there at the head of lines of long tables under a makeshift canopy tent overhead, more Koransha, piled up cups, saucers, fruit plates,

dishes discarded by quality control as second and third quality for tourists bargains I looked away only to spot the escape route from the overload. There: the Toilet and Smoking Area sign! No sooner had I lit up "Are you American?" hit me again. I waited answering with bated breath, looking in the eyes of an obviously frank farmer or retired wrinkled mom & pop shop owner. He repeated in another studied English conversation phrase: "Where are you from?" gleaming at his wife in the distance. "Guess" was my prompt reply, taking a deep hit from the nicotine stick. And then all over again "We Japanese are not good at English". Ignoring it I continued in pleasantries: Berugi de umarimashita kedo, kokuseki wa denma~ku desu, born in Belgium, nationality Denmark.

"Oh, you speak Japanese?" and I was at a loss again. "furi wo shite iru dake desu" was at the tip of my tongue, but that's when they see me reading Japanese and ask "Can you read Japanese?" to which the response would be: "only pretending". The easy way out now is: "I can get by" ma~nanntoka. I'm not sure whether the wife called him to get him out of the hairy situation, but it was a relief for the both of us I imagine. I felt sorry for him; having confronted him with wry English, near to impossible communicating in decently colloquial language. Japanese language is so much more refined, cultured, nurtured in politeness and respect, 'tatemae' if you like -literally 'façade', the important distinction between what one says in public and what is left unspoken. Whereas 'Honne' may be contrary to what is expected by society, kept hidden, except with one's closest friends. Stereotypically, the protagonist would have to choose between carrying out his obligations or pursuing a forbidden love affair. It is therefore all the more a love affair when hearing Chinese and Korean announcements of departing trains in major stations that I pass through frequently. Yes, I am here in the Orient, the Far East.

Without doubt integrating in a culture that is less individualistically orientated and all the more seeking consensus collectively needs stages of adjustments. Can I completely pretend assimilation, tune in and tune out? Having been lifted out of a mixed bag of Danish collective national pride and individualistic Flemishness, a repeat of that blank Denmark stage in the 90s bubble burst Japan was like living as a king in France, wining and dining, partying and boozing like a fish needs water to swim in. A honey moon that lasted twice good 7 fat years; the first stage according to those knowledgeable. One eye in the world of the blind is definitely King!

I survived the initial culture shock all right and passing thru the second stage 'Negotiation' where adaptation of gut flora to different bacteria levels and concentrations in food and water made one of my testicles swell to the size bigger than a golf ball, the doctor left me in no doubt about his diagnosis for men who fuck their Japanese women, cut it off! A second opinion was more foreigners friendly, I survived that one as well, I still have the balls, much to the pleasure of my wife goes without saying.

How do you define personal experiences with the measure of academic knowledge in the 'Adjustment' phase? When special attention must be paid to one's and others' culture-specific body language signs, linguistic faux pas, conversation tone, customs, and perceived false friendliness. And then again, how to interpret sensations of self-importance, the kind that comes as 'In the Wake of Poseidon' the second album by the progressive rock group King Crimson, self-importance in a negotiation that has not even been successfully pronounced a deal closed, leaving the Unspoken Word; Facial Expressions; Genuine Gestures, the notion of despise and belittling the other party with Mondrian's Dutch flatland rectangular placards value? Just a notion? In the analysis of where it arises and where it remains, not to forget where it goes, is the conclusion not forlorn? How do you empty it out, rest devoid of endless repetitions of short circular renditions of recent encounters with eye-opening phenomena? All I see with eyes wide shut is a bottomless container, an empty shape, incapable of retaining abstract value. What did I learn in the years of imaginary Zen practice? No more than eating rice in a proper manner and walking with my head up, relieved from the heavy burden of carrying western cultural and religiously acquired baggage, not to forget maintaining a lifestyle, but I still need to learn sleeping properly. Meanwhile that's what it says: 'Adjustment'. One becomes concerned with basic living again, and things become more "normal".

Mastery is ahead on the cross-road and I hope that in the mastery stage I'll be the assignee able to participate fully and comfortably in the host culture. In the meantime, day in day out, year in year out, trampling stairs in mass transit stations, feet leading of their own accord in cadence with the waves of black hair and slit oriental eyes, speaking a familiar sounding but foreign language behind facemasks and that despite the best efforts to study and understand it, at the end of the day all isn't instantly compatible with the attitudes and behavior one was born in, grew up in, was raised in. Now that I will be wearing a facemask for the next two weeks to hide the surgical incision made to drain acute streptococcus bacterial infection on my cheek, I can with comfort disappear into self imposed isolation and every morning insert a tiny new bit of gauze into the open wound myself, but my chances for complete recovery look good says the lady doctor.

The once subtle scents of temple incense, nature's moist fragrances in summer, the rank odors of restaurant suction tracts that ooze fresh fish and fried mustard oil, it all accumulates -whether adding the burning and tearing eyes from yellow dust blowing over from China's interior desert in spring or the blurred sights of an Asian city with a profound Western face lift where locally produced sauce tastes of used car tires, that alone will trigger reminds of mind altering substances of the 60s.

And -if you are like me into the exotic, attracted by the monasteries of past millennium, forbidding abodes of closed retreats from worldly affairs set you back several centuries to where time is perceived in segments of learning how to dress, walk, eat, talk, sleep, and sit upright long hours where studying or 'zokin gakke' scrubbing the wooden floors is a welcome pastime will certainly be mind altering.

I run away, repeat old habits from the times when I was 15. I take to cycling. In a different tunic a lone rider steps the pedals up over mountain passes, ignoring the roadblock signboard stating: Nature preserve, beware of bears and snakes, no thru traffic, I push on. On these roads least traveled the surrounding sights, sounds and smells introduce a taste of all the doors of perception opening up a void in which I cannot rest. Lost in translation I declare there is no Buddha out here, when reasoning blurs clarity once more and argues the Buddha from within, his four noble truths remain within me. End of the road and U-turn back to the world of humans.

Hereafter I'm still struggling with the individual vs the collective that carries on the continuity of traditions rigorously even at the expense of individuals not able to cope with institutionalized religion, Taoist and Confucius based philosophy alike.

Individualism (IDV)

On the scale from 0-100 Japan ranks 46

Masculinity versus femininity

Stated is: a masculine culture emphasizes status derived from wages and position; in Japan that translates into a proverb: a healthy man is out (meaning working).

A feminine culture emphasizes human relations and quality of life, femininity refers to the distribution of roles between the genders which is another fundamental issue for any society to which a range of solutions are found.

(a) women's values differ less among societies than men's values;

(b) men's values from one country to another contain a dimension from very assertive and competitive and maximally different from women's values on the one side, to modest and caring and similar to women's values on the other.

The assertive pole has been called 'masculine' and the modest, caring pole 'feminine'.

Set aside the efforts to make male/female equality a fact of life in conversational English textbooks for adults, the focus is still on every lamentable aspect of western society that is open for discussion, an extra hurdle for Japanese who in their culture are not encouraged to having much of individual opinions about things, particularly on the bad, the ugly and the regrettable, why then cultivate a line of reasoning that inevitably will end in the other extreme: opinionated and judgmental individuals that need to be reined in by reasoning to moderation, tolerance, and acceptance of cultures that have this engrained in their DNA in the first place? Would gene manipulation perhaps be the solution? We're well on the way, we already have designer babies.

In this very masculine environment where women even speak their own distinct feminine Japanese, the drive for being outstanding has only developed here for me. A bit late to start a career at 40 my cousin remarked on his visit. I can't disagree nor agree with his competitive drive statement. Perhaps there are role models who started life at 60, but I haven't come across any so far. Is playing the second fiddle a secure attitude to escaping the blame when things go wrong or not going according wishes -whomsoever wishes they were - yours, mine or the boss's? Avoiding to take responsibility for your actions is possible but for their consequences? Ultimately we can blame society or the times when in fact we were unable to lead things our way, while on the other side of the globe they say with ease to women and men alike 'hey you guys, do the right thing'... and endlessly argue what that right thing is supposed to be.

Most of the literature discussing gender roles in Japan comes from studies conducted in the United States, Japan's big brother. The results of cross-cultural research that often involves translation of questionnaires into English might very well be influenced in the process. It is common knowledge that literal translation is not always possible due to a frequent deficiency of semantic equivalents in the target language. Even when an equivalent word or phrase may be available it may not convey the exact same meaning, that I can vouch for. Findings of reversed gender role personality among elderly men is explained as a process of adult development, and seem to be inconsistent in scales of the elderly men becoming gentler, humbler while others grumpier, elder women bossier or cackling hens. You would expect that high school kids and college students alike still hold traditional gender specific traits of the hunting provider man and the woman at the pots in the kitchen, baby strapped on the back, but the fact that both sexes now stay unmarried until they are well over 30 and have less children proves the times they are changing. Come mothers and fathers throughout the land -to repeat Robert Zimmerman, government offers women 1 million Yen for raising a second child but they think it's not enough and they'll produce a second one for more than the double, that's when the health minister Yanagisawa called Japanese women of childbearing age 'birth-giving-machines' and was forced to resign over such name giving. Perhaps westernizing the East through language revision could be the solution, starting with she-male instead of female. Why is the French woman I saw interviewed on 'Cool Japan' offended by the sales man only talking to her husband about the unit bath they want to have installed? Doesn't she know her place is the kitchen and the bathroom is the man's territory here? I learned that long time ago when a woman told me of her arranged marriage story. Actually she was quite happy telling with an underlying pride that her husband did not have a house key so she had to wait till he came home, sit up at times when he was out till 2am before she could take the traditional bath after him before bed time.

How many roads must a man walk down, before they call him a man? Another well known Zimmerman lyric that Lennon not believes in, makes me drift off again. How many times have I drifted off the subject matter? This string of thought is not different, and no matter how I tried to Tregchöd, the Tibetan Dzogchen term for cutting through, cutting my mala's bindu bead included, has apperception thus brought into connexion the already existent and systematized mental conception of a wandering Nagpa's role model when I recognized the masculinity of Zen priests in training? It happened in the fore mid-day after a December late sunrise sounded, 750 years at every single break of dawn the Kencho-ji temple bell has reached the ear and consciousness of ear, knocking up those practitioners present for the first za-zen session in the main hall before breakfast. In an impetuous order all moved, futons folded, Samui tunic tied, slapped cold water on the face and measured paces down the gangway to the Butsuden. There the zabuton cushion was inviting to nothing more than sitting in the cold morning hours. I skipped breakfast of watery rice soup and pickled veggies to avoid painful seza sitting on the wooden floor only covered with a thin square cushion and skipped not in the least hearing the monk shouting at the top of his lungs: NOISY, put your Okayu rice bowl down in the proper way. We were queued for attending 'rohatsu' in the closed for the public Sen-Mon-Dojo, a hamlet behind walls in Chinese layout, aligned more or less on a north to south axis, narrow streets paved with flat slate rocks, storage houses, houses hosting the galleys and cooking facilities, monks quarters, all so immaculately clean wooden buildings some with cusped or bell-shaped windows. Here I sat when the 'real men' made their fast paced entrance in grey robes and rough woven cloaks amidst a whirl of fresh gentle breeze that blew through the open windows, doors and my bones. They had been meditating all throughout the nights during this week long sesshin in annual observance of the Bodhi Day culminating here this December 8. Chanting Hanya Shingyo, the Heart Sutra, in a pace that powers you up beyond cold comprehension, they're a repeat of the heart and soul without borders, in nomenclature: apperception.

The dilemma however is to keep my sanity in this hyped up news and networked information age or go nuts in my rainbow colored soap bell. Join the tweets on twitter, my i-posting of the day: i-came, i-saw and i-reported - Veni Vedi Vici paraphrased. Or bounce off the invisible cultural difference wall when trying to scale it head-on? Or walk through the wall and bang my head on the air having a different balance of elements? Where have all the similarities gone that I once enjoyed? The shared joy at breathing the same air, the same need for keeping warm when it's cold and when you've got to go you've got to relieve yourself, right? Indulgence in Sake rice wine here, let alone the dream we float on when festivities with Taiko take you to the tower of power -wherever you are- whether a faint scent from somewhere under the hems of a skirt nearby hovers over and you wonder if the woman just came out of the toiletries factory or you wonder whether it needs lightning striking thunderbolts to bring you back to the here and now, all to what avail when I just want to break free from the rigid discipline of 20 years commuting? Anyway, I'm still standing, going strong and break even on my annual balance sheet.

Escaping the West head over heels, some luck that follows the fool helped me over the worst of consequences. There must be a way out of this masculine mess, cissy sneaky if need to be, but what did I sneak myself into? Into a journey without return? On a romantic stroll along the Tama River in the early returnee days my then wife-to-be asked: "Are you an opportunist?" with that mutinous smile on her broad cheekbone face that reminded me of the same question she had asked in 1975 Bangkok, a long smileage indeed.

No matter how strong the forces of undone desires pull me to a past of power and control, and by lack of them seek back to the state of embryonic embrace, now slung into a universe that captures rudderless matter in orbit to the primordial, here I find myself surrendering to faith. Tired of battling fate, I sit, I walk, eat and sleep, and even forgive myself for the narcissism that lures me to believe I am the one who is. If there were no others to perceive me would I exist? And in then in the absence of mental activity in a moment of Belgian void, staring at the way of tiers of white clouds in my sister's garden, there: on to J-a-p-a-n as if it merely were a mere combination of letters devoid of any image, meaning or memory, only vast fear of the unknown. Back in masculine Japan, again there is nothing I can do about it, let it go, let it be, be and breath, and with every breath one step closer to death. Then what?

The reasoning goes: nothing in this world remains the same, all is impermanent. We know all too well: For Death Cometh to Us All and however hard we try to comfort ourselves in extending 'us' beyond it, in offspring, in legacies, in writing, there is no escaping it, fact of life. We're so to speak prisoners of our boundaries as humans. Even when these boundaries are pushed far beyond what was considered conceivable by the generations that have gone over the moon with their discoveries, put Mars and Venus in the bedroom, peek into galaxies millions of light-years away, reconstruct bone-crunching predator sea-monsters from the Jurassic oceans; many frontiers still remain, the crinkles in cultural and religious differences for one, reverse culture shock another. In Europe people seem to be out of proportions, too long-shanked, inseam immeasurably torso or hips broader than shoulders, arms too short or face too pronounced, have insisting and persuading voices, need more space for gesturing. After returning to Japan all appears normal again. Or does it? When life is all but a dream, how to describe reality? Pointing at the moon? Yes, you need to see for yourself. I have only one retort: learn to simply sit, breath, bathe, walk mindfully, and commute.

When did short sighted decisions forced by impending system collapses take the overhand to solve imminent threats to continuity and survival of the fittest? And is this question an applicable excuse for failing consistency in principles? Or should we all flip-flop like leaves in the wind? No, we seek democratic solutions; parrot the lingua of the day, we meet half way and settle for a part solution leaving a part that is not solved. Part solutions upon part solutions that grow in complexity and ultimately are so much out of proportion to what is viably solvable that you would start thinking like Mao: Level everything to the ground and start afresh. But then again, we see the result in 2012 of that ideology of globalization, the rise of the paper dragon. Facts and figures won't do for me, empirical knowledge then? I've been here and there and places in between, I've seen this and yes, done that, it's occurred to me and by the end of this newsletter from nowhere you'll know the rest of the story and you would certainly agree that a fool can ask more questions than an intelligent person can answer. A frequently asked question I found most intriguing is: "You traveled wide and far, what is your most favorite country?" to which I in all earnest reply Japan. "Why" is almost a guaranteed follow up. Let's see, because Japan has the best of the East and the best of the West.

Masculinity (MAS)

On the scale from 0-100 Japan ranks 95

Time orientation

1. Monochronic and Polychronic Time
2. Past and future-oriented countries
3. fast and slow messages speed spectrum
4. high and low context / information flow is it fast or slow?
5. unconscious reactions to spatial differences
6. Past and future-oriented countries
7. putting it in context

20 years ago we married quietly, just the two of us going to town hall to hand in the papers at 'mado-guchi' the window counter, declaring we were husband and wife, that's it. Two witnesses had signed our declaration the day before, the sister of the Mayor of Fussa city for my wife to be and a befriended Japanese who married a Korean mail-bride had signed for me. I had the document from the Danish Embassy stating there was no cause for raising polygamy red flags. We had a newly made Canadian friend David Bull, the Woodblock Printer, taking some photographs when coming out of the town hall and in the temple garden behind. Nongkie in her Vietnamese styled blue silk dress, lotus embroidered and with cone straw hat and I in my Sundays best with bow tie and cuff buttons; it was all a formality one might well observe. No one in our respective families knew. We had to casually tell them sooner or later. Honeymoon? Not even to the notorious Japanese love hotels, but we bought a condominium under construction on a 30 year mortgage while still living apart. She came to me once during week and I started staying overnight at her place in a Danchi or social housing at weekends. It was just the two of us since time immemorial. A one step at the time, the monochronic time. In monochronic cultures time is experienced and in a linear way scheduled and compartmentalized. Schedule takes priority above all else and shall be treated as sacred and unalterable, suiting us well.

Later when things had come into the open and her printing and publishing company had found out, they organized a company group trip to Australia; secret individualism had to be corrected in this collective conscious society and if that was not enough the book 'The Chronicle of Mamuda, the Island of the Gods' that she had written on over 10 years since its incubation on Bali where we hid as runaways in 1975, had to be published. Over a year she worked on re-writing the 500+ pages in collaboration with the editor of the most renowned publishing house Fukuin-kan. We started multi-tasking in Polychronic time when the early 90s computers did not offer that until the Windows 3.5 version, long after DOS 5 that I started with took a big bite out of my time, exchanging messages on a black screen over fax modem with the Curator of the Ontario Museum in Canada and it was an exciting time discovering Nongkie's lost contact friends in California and New Zealand this way. In follow up we traveled in ordinary time by plane to meet them there.

Again Japanese society showed just how they adhere to deep-seated traditions, with lavish celebrations, publishing and rewarding Ezo Nobuko's Mamuda a prize of the best book of the year, just at the time one of my family members happened to visit us.

What'd you know? The sun was shining on us, all accidentally well timed and in sync with our rhythm. Most tangible that was, perceiving time as if it were money, something that can be spent, saved or wasted and lost. I reflected on my 17 years in Denmark and how much I had wasted and lost time to frivolity in the 80s, playing chess and backgammon at open house weekends, following the Euro Cup in soccer on TV with friends who were into betting on 'Fodbold Tipskuponer'. While Scandinavians too are dominated by the iron fist of monochromatic time it is not a natural time. French Polychronic time is characterized by the simultaneous occurrence of many things and by a great involvement with people regardless of the encumbrance to one's intelligence. Once in a while I am blessed with entering a stream of thoughts that are easing the pain of having caused so much concern and considerable distress to others. I do not have a particularly likeable image of myself you will appreciate. From very early childhood I believe my disposition to provoke, be unruly, go against the grain leading to an ever growing disciplinary environment only to result in an ever greater thirst for expanding my space, taking borderless freedoms driven by an overpowering will to get it my way. Obviously crossing the line creates disbelief, distrust and disgrace opposite to what was intended, happiness. Still palpitations in the face of desired happiness occur.

In the relation between time and space what disrupts the flow of information, shutting people off, giving precedence to other than family members? Spending a great deal of time with close links, creating a reciprocal feeling of obligation and mutual desire to be helpful yes, but at the end of the commuting day nothing to write home about. While these days language -though a slow medium to convey a message- is exceedingly on the high end of the speed spectrum, just look around in our world of today: webcam communications outdating instant messaging and chat rooms, SMS, Twitter, TV, consumer conducive commercials, fuzzy financial markets at god's speed, why did I marry the Far East past oriented culture where putting everything in an historical perspective is very important? Is my background that uneducated that I don't understand how to get on with it? Am I that steeped in high-context cultures like the Japanese that need alluding to the lately much highlighted holistic approach or even better to obliquity? This new theory proposes the best means of achieving a goal may often be to take an indirect approach rather than a direct one. At present there is no satisfactory explanation for why and how differences of this sort - the Western culture of criticism versus the Far East forbearance- came about, but in Japan a lot goes without saying, and reading between the lines, and the indirect approach is slowly overpowered by the speak your mind thing, shoot straightforward cowboy culture. For 20 long worn out years I have received tuition fees paid in cash, crisp banknotes in a white to size envelope, both never used. Does the person in charge of my private classes ask the bank teller for this kind of bills? How would I ask for that in Japanese then? It's about time to find out. And why didn't I yet for heaven's sake?

I was taught that every action had to have a purpose; that purpose being freedom from the boundaries of life in the world that inherently contains suffering of perpetual cycles between life and death. You would find it difficult to justify going surfing just for pleasure, or cycling for that matter. If I needed crisp banknotes I'd quickly find out how to formulate my question to the bank teller. Used banknotes rather than new ones are offered to give the impression of the 'unexpectedness' of death. Every time I brave people passing away, at the funeral or cremation there is this one thought that pops up: A lifetime accomplished. It was lived to the fullest and to the end. When paying my mother last respects recently it was no exception. The exceptional was the timing though. How do I describe let alone explain the synchronicity of events and instant reflections on the sequence of events as they incessantly reoccur? My memory serves me better steeped in days gone by. Fortunately the first time I mumbled 'ryoshusho sama deshita' at our Ukrainian friend's funeral- the receipt please-, instead of 'goshusho sama deshita -my deepest condolences, no one took notice. I did take notice of the white bleached bones as they came out of the furnace for cremation and made no social faux pas when picking the bones out of the ashes with long chopsticks, we held the same bone at the same time with our chopsticks transferring them to the urn. The bones of the feet are picked up first, and the bones of the skull are picked up last, this to ensure that the deceased is not upside down in the urn. All the while we were given explanation about the shades of color of certain bones and what it meant. Igor I think wouldn't care less.

Rankei Doryū, the Chinese Zen master of the Sung Dynasty who moved to Japan in 1246, founding Kencho-ji in Kamakura wrote in an astounding phrase: If you've lost your true self and phenomena arising all around you are but annoyance, then there is only one way forward, you're on the right track.

What is seeing the true nature of your mind all about? Certainly not observing mental activity, or analyzing thought patterns, speculating about connecting the dots when they are connected in the first place, fascinating as it may be little happiness is derived from that. I find the contents of my mind not particularly pleasurable and I wallow irresistibly in perpetual torment. I know what it's like to feel the bad man, the sad man, identify myself with the losers; conclude I'm a total failure. Mercifully enough my eyes meet tiny signs of arguments that prove different; I discover a black business suit in my closet. But that is easily cast aside, it's only outwardly upholding a derelict shell but inwardly profoundly disgruntled with the stale taste in my mouth, the residue of nicotine and sake rice wine.

Taking a firm grip on the drop handlebars of my road racing bike, I swing a leg over, hammer the pedals and ignore the tightness in my chest, the tennis elbow acting up too but on and on I ride. I spit and spew, hock loogies, blowing snot rockets left and right for the better part of the day, no one to sit on the wheel or echelon. On this grunt I've bonked and need to fill up on glycogen from the bidon. My nods to passerby poser riders on granny gear are returned. Slowly I recover from EDW Extreme Wiener Discomfort and if that doesn't say it: penile numbness and get on with it, impotence? What the heck! Then finally up on the mountain pass memory is receding from the front hallway of my consciousness, no tricks of recollection, ego at a loss or mistaken identity -somewhere in the middle of nowhere- here I stand in a defiant posture, with arms akimbo and gaze the range of rugged mountains with the haze hanging below in the valley. This must be nirvana in cycling lingo, the state of being in absolute control and totally in tune with your bike, the trail, and your physical strength. It's mid afternoon and I check my on board wireless cyclo-computer, my average speed has dropped below 20km/h on this ride, but the long and winding road downhill will surely push it up again. On the rivet I go gonzo riding, with reckless abandon hog the road, my eyes burn and tear from the cedar pollen despite the road bike sunglasses, the wind whipping my jersey, sweat is running down the runnels of my ears. I take a death grip on the handlebars' curved front part in fear for small sharp stones or pebbles on the road resulting in an endo, short for end-over-end but it won't happen this time around either, I know it deep down. It's dark when I re-enter the human habited world and now there are no more safety concerns with my front and back light blinking, Japan is great! Today I made an all time speed record of 68.4 km/h improving my 2004 record by 1.2 km without even trying. Who called: 'With the least of effort the maximum result' his/her motto? I adopted it in Denmark, but here I may have to adapt it and say with the maximum of effort at least a result.

I have given it free rein again. You may now have grown accustomed to reading my particular way of putting things as with the poignant episode Denmark 18 years after, but as passionate as my dad's academic style in publishing findings of bryologists and lichenologists studying exceptional cryptogamic and phanerogame flora it probably will not become. Only the rhythm of nature is time orientation when all other references to history and past have been exhausted and thus lead time is short and bumpy with me. My language of time is most

likely needing to get acquainted with. How to read the intangible message associated with time?

No sooner had I finished printing off a letter to an Irish friend of mine, a not so congenial response, I doubted sending it. But then again, doubt and fear are not the best advisors or so I'm told. On I go, sealing it in an envelope, gluing a printed label on the addressee side, the last one I had. Now stamps, from the carton wrapping of woodblock prints that I subscribe to I soak off some that were not invalidated and could be reused in my view. While reflecting on the rather trying response in which the undercurrent boils down to: hey man, this is it. On which of side of the e-divide do you want to be? If you want to communicate with me do it through email.

He did try once before but needed help I'm sure to accomplish the task and then when there is no response to my reply what do you do? Considering I owe him, I prepare an old fashioned letter, though not handwritten like his. Could be he is having some sort of dyslexia to see from the spelling. I do not mind receiving a handwritten letter from 70+ year olds, though my dad at 89 emails me frequently, scanned attachments as a matter of routine. But from people 10 years younger than I am? Well, I owe him this favor. After all I'm still benefitting from a job he introduced me to 18 years ago, and on his frequent family visits in Tokyo the last one to us is at least 8 years ago. Strange that people only seem to remember you when they need something from you. Acknowledging those that benefitted me but receive little or no acknowledgement from me, that reeks of ruckus beyond redemption. Simply put it goes against the grain of the long term commitment culture here, persistence, adulation and by lack of it shame. But where does animosity then fit in?

At the Kiosk in a transit station I stand pondering my own navel, last Friday they did have a one cup of Ozeki Sake 'tsumetakunai' -not cold from the fridge- when the week before I showed a very upset face with red eyes of anger almost popping out of the eye sockets, the new student part-timer simply refused to look in the back storage for a Sake cup 'tsumetakunai' when I see this figure approaching, ragged work boots as coming through time travel from the 50s, dark blue Duffel coat clad, the knitted scarf twice wound around his neck and on his inclined head a hood capped his ears covering his eyebrows to signal incognito like Japanese women do, but the Nixon nose gave him away: no foreigner with a celestial honker from Duffel in Belgium where the name of the coat originated, no it was Robin, what d' you know? Ten years longer in Japan than I have been and stubbornly sticking to his teaching tools. "Hey, Robin! Long time no see; how've you been?" incapable of thickening my accent till it dripped. "I'm good" he replied in a stealthy way, tailing it with "brisk today hey?" The question had a barb in it, it's not the first time he pulls some idiomatic English from up his sleeve and examines with self indulgent piercing eyes if I know what he is talking about. "Indeed" I replied as British as can be, though he is from Ireland, "the tips of my fingers are numb". "Numbing" he corrected with a gold-capped smile. Should I argue they are numb and without feeling no doubt, or concede they may not be in the same state of numbness as after a dentist's anesthetic injection? We get on the train and continue a somewhat strained conversation. Looking at me in my Japanese copycat business outfit he asks me how the job is and that gets me going. Computers, website and Java, my cup of tea -I'm not just an English teacher, with an intense animosity welling up. Whose? Mine or his?

Damn it, what's this? Have I been tricked into opening the sluices of bottled up secluded frustration, while he disappears into the land of incognito and elicit all that from this student as professionals do, I give him that. We haven't seen since, but just yesterday animosity popped up its venomous head again, though in an entirely wordless context. For the second time in less than a week I find myself crammed on a seat in the train with a Japanese middle-aged spread business man, majestic buttocks, sitting solid as a rock next to me. I shrink to allow for ample space and focus on re-reading the East is East book, secondhand purchased in 1994, but it does not seem to be enough. I feel this arm, this elbow, and this animosity. His or mine? Damn it, I lose concentration, I breathe all right, a somnolent breath, shallow but slow and deep into the lower belly as not to take too much space with my rooster chest. Tenaciously I hold onto the thought that I am a guest in Japan and should be glad to have a spot after the dot.god and a soupçon of decency. In the adamant space I settle for redeeming the kindness I received in my honey moon years, like the penitence that T.C. Boyle describes of his Japanese character in "East is East" but the brief moment between two eternities doesn't last long, I'm back to the rise and fall of breathing, wax philosophical. Unconscious reactions to spacial differences? If not Sosuke's character in Soseki Natsume's book Mon, the most desolate story I've ever read, knows what it's like, then only the devil knows.

How many years has it been since this intense sensation of wanting to break loose first came over me? Australia it was, in Sydney where on our second honey moon with my wife's Colony company I felt leg-shackled in a stereotype Japanese group tour. Have I ever been able to feel and stay secure in my comfort zone? I guess not, since the fatal attraction always catches on, the one of dropping out of society and its conventions. Leave all and everything behind, retreat from the concrete jungle, seek refuge in the boondocks and live on picking berries, dig bamboo shoots, ferment soya beans and pickle veggies. Perhaps cultivate Daylily edible flowers and play Shakuhachi flute high up on the hill. But in the real world all looks just ordinary, on the outside that is. Me included, just another gaijin in the category of black business suits, but an outsider by definition. Putting it in context, OK, trace back and reboot. Re-dream the dream and opt for an outlook with past point pleasant presentation, isn't that what I've been fatally fascinated by in cycles of three four years at the time? Change country, nationality, language, staple food, job and jolly women, or was it in reverse order? Now of course after 20 long and languorous years of uninterrupted commuter life in Tokyo the average length of cycles must have prolonged the anguish that drove me out of my skin previously. Only time can tell.

Meanwhile, working in a foreign language, translating inevitably requires reviewing semantics, re-evaluating words and expressions and with Japanese Kanji or Chinese pictograms that alone takes it to whole new dimension. Language, oh yes, on and on it goes, clearly every bird sings as it is beaked. Listen to Kofi Annan's diplomatic slicky-sweet language for instance so close to daily spoken Japanese, but also here no matter how deeply rooted in history, the cultural divide in language between the culture of criticism in the west and the culture of praise in the east, it just isn't solving the horrendous crimes against humanity, the dowry, widow burning, the female circumcision, acid attacks and honor killings, corrective rape and chocolate slavery, debt bounded brick laborers, blood diamonds, modern day sex slaves, the list is too long to remember, too short while ago to forget.

Understanding of cultural differences is one thing, how to apply that understanding is another. This is it, the honey moon is over.

Power Distance Index (PDI) Individualism (IDV) Masculinity (MAS) Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI) Long Term Orientation (LTO)

On the scale from 0-100 Japan ranks

	PDI	IDV	MAS	UAI	LTO
Japan	54	46	95	92	80

G.L.Slembrouck March 2012