



A Loose Thread

The Japanese government recently established a new tourist agency in an attempt to increase the numbers of visitors to this country. (I have no idea whether or not this program will be successful; after all, most Japanese well know what you have to do if you want to enjoy an inexpensive vacation - go overseas!)

As part of its efforts, the new agency will promote Japanese culture around the world, and encourage organizations here to provide interesting experiences for the tourists once they arrive. Well, I'm ready! Every now and then, I get an email from somebody who is coming over to Japan, who has an interest in woodblock printmaking, and who would like to drop by my studio. If my work schedule permits, and it does seem like their interest is genuine, then I usually accede to the request, and play host for a couple of hours, showing them my workplace and the prints.

This happened just a couple of weeks ago, when a lady from Australia came by. The lady had been travelling around Japan for some days before coming to see me, and had accumulated quite a stock of stories about the things she had seen and enjoyed - the wonderful train system, with its 'clockwork' schedules, the efficient service in all the shops, and a number of other episodes that had left her with a positive impression of this very well-ordered society.

Now I have no gallery here, and never make any attempt to sell anything to my visitors, but it does happen that they may turn into a collector, either by placing an order while they are here, or by contacting me later. That is what happened in this case, as she sent an email after returning home, asking for a set of the prints. (Perhaps she had to wait until she saw how much money she had left after her trip!)

As it turned out, this was to lead to an interesting little 'lesson' in comparative cultures. She needed to send payment from Australia, so I gave her my bank information, and then waited for the remittance to arrive in my account.

What happened instead, was that I received a phone call from my bank. The clerk wanted to let me know that a remittance had arrived from Australia, but because my name was slightly altered, it would have to be returned to the sender. I discussed this with the clerk, verifying that I was indeed waiting for such a remittance, that it was indeed intended for me, and that returning it for this small correction would cause everybody un-needed expense and trouble, but she was adamant. It could not go through, because my middle name 'Roy' was missing. I never use my middle name in daily life, but it is on my passport, and thus also on my bank account. And rules are rules.

Many years ago - in my early days in Japan - I would have been upset at this, would have asked to speak to the manager, and would generally have raged at such behaviour. "Don't you have any common sense? Just put this into my account!"

I no longer do that sort of thing. Not because I have 'given up', or because I have resigned myself to such 'stupid' behaviour. I now understand a bit better how many things in a society are woven together, and how you can't expect to pull a loose thread 'here' without causing a hole to appear 'there'.

David Bull
Seseragi Studio
Nagabuchi 8-4-5 Ome City
Tokyo Japan 198-0052
<http://astoryaweek.com>

The same strict rules that led to the transfer being returned are the same strict rules that lead to those trains pulling into the station exactly at the scheduled time, and the same rules that govern the behaviour of the shop clerks who impress the Australian visitors. And of course we could list many other examples.

Ideally, I would like to think that we can find a balance in society between 'the trains will run on time!' on the one hand, and the 'I guess we can let that go through ...' on the other. But I'm not actually sure if that is possible.

For me, I'm happy to wait a week or so while the bank transfer is re-scheduled; the next time I'm standing on the platform as my train pulls in, I'll remember why!

David Bull
Seseragi Studio
Nagabuchi 8-4-5 Ome City
Tokyo Japan 198-0052
<http://astoryaweek.com>