



Untrustworthy Foreigners!

I have been an expatriate here in Japan for more than twenty-five years now. Actually, that statement has a kind of internal contradiction. In the early years, I was certainly an 'expatriate' - I was a Canadian, I thought like a Canadian, walked and talked like a Canadian, and was clearly living in a 'strange' place. But after this many years living in Japan, I certainly no longer qualify as an expatriate. Although I do not think of myself as Japanese in any serious sense, this is *my* community, and this is *my* home. I am not a 'stranger' at all.

Now and again though, I have an experience that serves to remind me of the gap that still clearly remains between many of my own ways of thinking and those of the people who were born into the culture here, and last week was one such occasion.

Anybody who has been following these stories in recent months knows that I have been expanding my printmaking activities to include other workers, and there are now a half-dozen or so people working (mostly part-time) here. It is one of my bedrock philosophies that these people consider themselves as 'members' of the organization, and not just 'casual labour', even though most of them are working only a dozen hours a week or so. To this end, I have made everything here completely open - including all the background affairs of the business, including such things as sales figures, expenses, and even the level of cash in our bank accounts.

On their very first day I made it clear to each of them that this was a new - and untested - venture, and that I was certainly not able to promise them a stable employment. They were not joining an established company - instead, we would be working together to try and *build* an established company. We might succeed; we might fail.

Now inside my own mind - my *Canadian* mind - having things open and 'in the clear' like this, to a large extent absolves me of a lot of responsibility towards them. It's not me supporting them; it's us in this 'together'.

But the other day, when talking with the young man who is here to work on the construction of the wooden storage boxes for my new print series, I realized that he (and they?) see this quite differently.

We had been talking about what would happen if the number of print subscribers doesn't soon increase beyond the current (unsustainably) low level. "What are you going to do?" he had asked. My reply - in keeping with my personal light-hearted and stress-free approach to this whole thing - was something along the lines of, "Well, I'm not losing any sleep about it. There are now enough subscribers to keep me going, and if I have to 'retreat' back to the previous way of working alone, that'll be that. This will have been a nice 'adventure' ..."

He looked at me with a stunned expression, and I realized that I had made a very large mistake. In his eyes now, I was no different than one of those overseas CEOs who - when faced with the necessity of cutting expenses - will simply throw people overboard, not even looking back as they then sink and drown ...

I had sent him a clear message that I was at heart completely selfish, and would look out only for my own interests. Employees? Just there to be 'used' when needed, and discarded when not.

It's not enough for me to be *thinking* that we are 'all in this together'. The staff here simply can't see it that way. I am the boss, and part of being the boss means being responsible for their welfare. All of the people working here have children (adding them up there are eight, actually), and whether I like it or not, those children are now to some extent *my* children too.

Expatriate, indeed!

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