



At the Bus Stop (II)

It's not an uncommon experience for me to be chatting with someone and have them ask me a question about why I live in Japan, or perhaps why I *like* living in Japan. There are certainly plenty of foreigners with an interest in this country, and many come to stay for a while, but not so many actually make their permanent home here. Why have I stayed, when so many leave?

It's a very complex question to answer properly, but I had an experience the other day that might help to explain my feelings. Simply put, a bus driver nodded at me. Just a very slight nod of his head, but yet a gesture that contained within it a world of meaning ...

As regular readers know, there are a number of new faces around our workshop these days, training to be printers, helping with the construction of the print storage boxes, or working on support jobs such as wrapping prints. These people are not 'guests' in the common sense of the word, they are employees coming here to work, and yet I find it difficult sometimes to find the correct way to behave in various social situations.

One example is how I should behave when they leave each day. They are working to their own schedule/timetable, and thus have no set starting or finishing time. Because of this, people show up and leave at various times during the day, and there is no general 'Time to knockoff, everybody!' event.

Now when a guest leaves your home, you yourself don't just stay in your chair. You - at least - go to the door with them, wait while they put on their shoes and get ready, and then see them off with some kind of routine phrase, "See you tomorrow," or whatever suits the particular occasion. Is this necessary with employees though? I don't really think so; the boss of a big factory certainly doesn't escort each employee to the gate every day. But although the ladies working here are not 'guests', I haven't been able to bring myself to just ignore them when they leave, and have indeed been seeing them off at the entranceway. It just seems like the proper and polite thing to do.

Among the staff is a young woman (in her early 30s) who has been coming for printing training a couple of times a week, and she lives quite a long way away, travelling here by train and bus. When she leaves, she walks to the bus stop about ten minutes away to begin her long journey home. The other day, she stayed working until fairly late, and it was very dark by the time she left. I saw her to the entranceway, but it didn't seem right to simply stand there while she walked off into the dark, so I put my jacket on and walked with her to the bus stop, and then waited there until her bus arrived.

And it was what happened next that provides my example about why I like living in Japan. The bus pulled into the stop, the door opened, and she boarded. As the door closed behind her, I gave a half-bow, half-nod to the bus driver, and he responded in kind, bowing back at me before putting the bus in gear and pulling away.

Why did we do that? What were the 'messages' being transmitted?

It seems to me that I was essentially saying to him, "Thank you for providing this service for us. I am entrusting this young woman to your care; please see that she arrives at her destination safely."

And his reply was simple and straightforward, "Got it. You can trust me ..."

Now perhaps such 'soundless' conversations also happen in other places, and other countries. Perhaps.

But it is a matter of quite some deep satisfaction that my own society here is one such place. And it could be that my attempts to go that 'little bit extra' in treating my associates with politeness and respect is perhaps helping to keep it that way.

Perhaps.

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