北島：我的日本朋友
My Japanese Friend

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My Japanese friend AD was born in the late fifties of the last century, before the Japanese economy took off, so, owing to poor nutrition, he is short, only 163 centimetres tall. 'That's the average height of Japanese males born the same year as I was,' he chortled as he said this, partly out of resignation, partly out of self-mockery, as if he were a surviving creature of the prehistory of Japanese modernization. He was born to a farming family in Hokkaido and began studying Chinese in college. When he mentioned his advisor his face was filled with admiration, as if he wanted others to share in his appreciation of the bounties that had been bestowed upon him. Through the guidance of this advisor he had worked in a bookstore in Osaka for several years, saving up money bit by bit to go study in Beijing. His memories of being a store clerk were not all that happy, as he himself put it: 'Every day I had to bow at least several hundred times.'

In Beijing he distanced himself from his own culture. I can imagine the carefree air of a Japanese who has been drifting along in China for some time: they can yawn into the breeze, stretch themselves when it pleases them, and stroll about wearing a vest. After he graduated from the Beijing Language Institute, he was determined to remain in Beijing. 'I dread it whenever I think about how many times a day I would have to bow were I to return to Japan,' he said.

Speaking of Japanese bowing, I have to confess to having submitted to it. A few years ago I went to Japan for an activity, and wherever I went I would immediately shake hands, hoping to avoid the cumbersome formality of bowing. But I discovered it was in vain, as when Japanese are done shaking hands, they step back and bow deeply. So when in Rome … it was left for me to bow after

shaking hands, or bow first and then shake hands, until I finally just gave up the handshaking. The discipline of bowing is both extensive and profound, the degree of bend determined by all sorts of differences, such as social position, level of wealth, age, and gender; not only that, but once set, it cannot be remedied. It is said that in Japan when some companies train their new hires they prepare an adjustable triangular framework for practising bowing, which alone would take three arduous months. Because of this obsession, when in Japan one sees a person in a telephone kiosk bowing while speaking on the phone, one knows that the other person on the line is his boss.

I got to know AD at the beginning of the eighties. At the time the Iron Curtain had been replaced by a gauze one, but there was still a sense of mystery between Chinese and foreigners, and it was this sense of mystery that engendered so many romantic stories. Gu Xiaoyang 顧曉陽, then studying Japanese at Renmin University, would from time to time organize excursions to the far suburbs, mingling naive and romantic Japanese students with angry and combative Chinese youths, which was tantamount to putting sheep among wolves. AD was from the same town as one of the Japanese students, so he was brought along. First came the social dancing on the grass, followed by a picnic, the singing competition, with the final event being a poetry recital. Xiaoyang stammered out a translation of a poem by a rotund female Japanese student into sparse Chinese, then forced me to recite to all those assembled, after which he translated a sparse Chinese poem of mine into rotund Japanese.

After all the handsome, elegant, and intelligent had been flung off by the centrifuge of friendship, only the honest and simple AD remained, thus becoming our guest of honour. Because he happened to be hard up at the time, his savings all but spent, not to mention also owing his tuition, it was left to us, ten times poorer than he was, to tender an invitation. When the polite Chinese phrase 'all we do is add a pair of chopsticks' ran up against a straightforward Hokkaido peasant, the result was that whenever we had our weekend meal, he was sure to appear at the door.

We had another frequent guest at our house, the elder sister of my former wife's high school classmate, AL. Tall and strong, she was divorced with a child, and her job was hauling in pleasure boats in one of Beijing's parks. It must be said this work is not easy, as you have to be both precise and steady to haul a boat full of those anxious to go ashore—particularly boats full of lovers—back

to the dock. But no matter what, she just couldn't haul in such a boat on her own, so she was unavoidably anxious about it. Having no telephone actually makes things easy—she would just open the door and come in, and once she was there, it was for the day. Back then 'speaking bitterness' was the same as psychological counselling today, the difference being that it cost nothing and food was included. So AD and AL got to know one another at our house, and with them being a single man and a solitary woman, 'improper' thoughts inevitably transpired.

In the early summer of 1982 we took AD and AL to Baiyang Lake, a district of rivers and lakes in Baoding, where many of our friends had been rusticated during the Cultural Revolution. Beginning in the early seventies we had often idled there like drifting clouds or wild cranes. Now everyone had left and the buildings were empty, but our friendships with the local farmers remained.

Back then anything farther from Beijing than twenty kilometres was off limits to foreigners. Fortunately, Hokkaido peasants and Hebei farmers pretty much look alike, not to mention that AD spoke Chinese and was wearing old clothes, and they didn't check ID when selling train tickets. As we lined up in the middle of the night at the Yongdingmen station to board the train, I noticed sparks of terror in AD's eyes. I patted him on the shoulder and asked if he was feeling a bit chilly; he pulled in his shoulders, clenched his fists, and replied that he was. For a law-abiding Japanese there was a real risk here: should he be found out, it was quite possible he could be treated as a spy.

It was only after arriving at Baiyang Lake that I realized how perilous the situation was. Baiyang Lake had been an anti-Japanese base during the war, and 'fighting Japs' had become a perennial theme when people there talked to one another; if AD's identity were revealed, he could have been in mortal peril. It was a good thing that the local farmers had never travelled very far, so when we said that AD, with his short stature and thick accent, was Cantonese, nobody questioned it. Only once, when the young guy rowing our boat stared at AD and said, 'Why is it that the more I look at you, the more you look like a Jap translator?', it terrified AD into a cold sweat. He was a wrestler, and when he wrestled with the young men of the region his style was completely Japanese—he would take a horse stance, and when he exerted himself, would emit a strange howl. Luckily much time had gone by, and the descendants of the guerrillas could no longer recognize it.

We stayed at Dadiantou village, where the poet Mang Ke 芒克 had been rusticated back then. Under the direction of the disabled Fusheng 阜生 we swam and rowed during the day and drank and chatted at night. Baiyang Lake just happened to be experiencing a hundred-year drought, which, when combined with the pollution, had greatly reduced the fish population. So when they wished to entertain, the local fishermen used what they called a 'childless net' to scoop up fish no bigger than a crayon, of which even a hundred were not enough to fill a large bowl. Even the fishermen shook their heads and sighed: 'So sorry.' They left their homes for Tianjin and other places to go fishing so as to preserve their livelihoods.

At night the men and women slept in different houses. I shared a mud kang with AD, and before we'd go to sleep we'd talk of random things for a while. Baiyang Lake reminded him of Hokkaido; he would talk about his mother, talk about his childhood, with its poverty and loneliness. This homesickness seemed pretty strange: a Japanese at an anti-Japanese base thinking of home.

I obtained some important intelligence: the Beijing boat-hauler had fallen for the Hokkaido boat, and was determined to haul it away. So that night I sought out AD for a talk, telling him of the completeness of life and the need for relationships, and also of the resemblance between the attributes of hauling boats and love. All I could see was him knitting his brows in the darkness, and ceaselessly nodding his head. No, my memory is faulty here, it was actually the next morning. The first day we had drunk deep into the night, so we were still hung-over, and I suggested going for a walk. AD and I walked along a narrow country road toward the lake-shore, the reeds in the distance swaying in the wind. I've been told that the severity of my facial expression at the time terrified this obedient Japanese into interpreting this happy wish as an order.

Upon our return from the lake the two of them paired off, with delight spreading over AL's face, and AD just giggling. News of their engagement followed shortly thereafter. Who would have expected there to be obstacles, but the marriage encountered fierce resistance on the part of the family on the female side—it turned out her grandfather had been killed by the Japanese, and her father was the commander of a guerrilla unit during the anti-Japanese war. It was a family vendetta, like the origin of the tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet*. The father of 'Juliet' threatened thus: 'Marry whoever you want, but you'll marry a Japanese over my dead body.' This flabbergasted the Hokkaido 'Romeo', who

was incapable of wheedling, instead just crossing his legs and sitting dumbly on the bed in the house of 'Juliet', as innocent as a tea-leaf. In the face of the sincere psychological offensive combined with the mighty Japanese electrical appliances, the guerrilla commander eventually relented. So, *Romeo and Juliet* finally was able to have a postmodern edition.

In the winter of that year, they arranged for two tables of a celebratory banquet at the Hepingmen branch of the Quanjude Roast Duck Restaurant, inviting their friends, families, and the boss of the Japanese company where AD worked. I suppose the two bottles of 'Site' liquor they served were the first counterfeit liquor in China, for in a short time all the guests were dead drunk. The Japanese boss staggered over to the other table to toast some strangers, then opened up and screeched out a Japanese folk song. I was drinking along with Liu Xiaodian 劉小淀, discovering only later that he didn't get out of bed for two days. As for me, I rode my bike home past Zhongnanhai, and cursed out the policeman on duty; for his part he just waved his white gloves at me, as he couldn't be bothered to deal with an amateur drunk.

In the summer of 1983 my friend Annika, the cultural attaché at the Swedish embassy, was going on vacation to Hokkaido, so I introduced her to AD, who in turn introduced his relatives there to her. When she returned, she told us of the beauty of the Hokkaido scenery and the pure and simple quality of the people there. There was a language barrier, so she had a hard time communicating with AD's relatives, but she was moved by their warmth and hospitality. 'They remind me of the farmers in northern Sweden,' said Annika.

AD did legwork while working a good many years for a large Japanese company as a temp. Eventually, after going to the Tokyo headquarters for training he was made a regular employee. I've heard that to permanently hire someone like that, who had neither a technical nor a management background, was precedent-breaking in the entire company. He climbed up step by step from the very bottom, and in fewer than seven years became the general manager of the company's Beijing operation. It was said that his promotions were not just owed to his reliability and honesty, but more importantly to his deep understanding of Chinese cultural codes, his worldly wisdom, and his knowledge of the tricks of the trade. He was nimble at getting things done, and even high-ranking Chinese bureaucrats were very fond of him. He moved into a high-class apartment building, secured a personal chauffeur, and gradually faded from our line of sight.

As far as Chinese cultural codes are concerned, it all depends upon individual awareness. While studying at the Beijing Language Institute, he made a special trip to Chongqing for a holiday. In line with Japanese custom, he first researched travel guides, and booked the best hotel through a travel agent—The People's Hotel, which provided such classy services as saunas. I have stayed there myself, and from afar it resembles the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, but close up looks more like a temple to the Village God; it is a warped symbol of the veneration and envy of the high authority of the central government on the part of local officials.

In order to meld with the Chinese, he wore a faded Zhongshan jacket, styled a crew cut, and hit the road with great enthusiasm. As soon as he got off the train, he saw a person shouting and holding up a sign for The People's Inn. In his befuddlement he boarded a flat-bed pedicab with the other guests, and after numerous twists and turns arrived at a small alley near the station. He went through a brightly lit entrance, registered, and was settled on a communal bed. He lay down, consulted his guidebook, and perplexedly looked around, finally finding an attendant: 'Comrade, can you please tell me where the sauna is?' 'What sauna?' The man gave him the side-eye. So he pulled out his reservation receipt and the guidebook. It turned out he had confused 'The People's Hotel' with 'The People's Inn', the latter being a public bath house open for bathing in the daytime, but renting out beds at night. The next day he hurried over to The People's Hotel, but had no sooner entered than was lifted up and carried out by two hefty security guards: 'You crappy little beggar: is this the sort of place you belong in?' Kicking in the air, he shouted out: 'Me? I'm Japanese; I've reserved a room!' Only after he pulled out his Japanese passport did the guards let him go, with their apologies.

Reaching the end of the story, he laughed tartly. An ordinary person coming from a rigidly hierarchical society who learned another language out of regard for equality and social justice ... If it were only money that talked, that was a language he understood. Following his meteoric rise, he had only one pastime: golf. What a solitary sport: swinging a club and hiking around with all one's energy focused on putting a little white ball into various small holes. The emblem of rank the sport signified in China, however, could not have been clearer; all the attendants were completely deferential to him.

AD's fear of his wife was famous, and was a frequent topic of conversation in his company. It must be said that fearing one's wife is no bad thing, just as long

as it's not too public. He had any number of events he had to attend in Beijing, and whenever he would drink himself into a stupor and have to be carried home by his chauffeur and subordinates, his wife would refuse to open the door, so he would be forced to spend the night in the hallway, pillowed by the breeze in the corridor, and covered only by the bright moonlight.

Their son grew up with my daughter; they attended the same high school. My daughter relayed on to me an anecdote told by his son. When the whole family was away on holiday, one day the son returned to their hotel room and, standing outside, heard his father loudly rebuking his mother. It had the force of an avalanche, and was interspersed with sounds of beating. The son thought to himself: 'No way that my dad is fighting back with this amazing show of gall and recklessness.' Once he entered the room, however, he instantly understood everything: his mother was simply not there and his father was violently beating nothing more than a leather armchair.

I heard that AD would not forgive me for many years, all because of our conversation at Baiyang Lake. But that was then and things do change over time, and can we even say that back then a Chinese boat-hauler was not suited to marry a Japanese peasant, store clerk, and impoverished student? Even if we don't bring up the issue of social suitability, it was still the case that the two fell for one another.

In the winter of 2001 I returned to the Beijing from which I had been separated for thirteen long years, and saw AD and his family. After we had eaten dinner at a Sichuan restaurant, we went to his house for a brief visit. It must be said he looked as if he had hardly aged, being only a bit grey at the temples. He said very little that evening, seeming a bit reserved. I downed two glasses of *baijiu*, became a bit giddy, and allowed my feelings to emerge. I suddenly thought of going to visit Hokkaido with him, to see where he had grown up and trace out the course of his childhood; and it also all at once occurred to me to thread through the dense fogs of twenty years passed and return to that morning at Baiyang Lake. By the shore, with its reeds swaying in the wind, perhaps I should have said something else, such as, 'If you're a boat, drifting is your fate; you should never pull in to shore.'