

COUNTERPOINT

A rough guide to avoiding ethnocentric cloddery

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Special to The Japan Times

Writing in The Guardian on Oct. 16, Mark McCrum listed 10 "hot tips to avoid social embarrassment" while traveling overseas. There were three among these travel faux pas that particularly caught my eye.

Drinking or talking during a toast in Azerbaijan is a definite no-no. These toasts can apparently last for hours. What an admirable tradition! Disallowing drinking or talking during a toast should be a custom adopted around the world as a way to deal with alcoholic blabbermouths in one fell swoop.

Giving the thumbs-up sign in Iran is also not kosher. That particular gesticulation means "Sit on this!" to an Iranian. Putting aside the fact that you'd have to be a double-jointed hermaphrodite to sit on two thumbs, U.S. President George W. Bush had better watch out when he rides atop a tank into "liberated" Tehran. No one will throw flowers at a president who doesn't know his thumb from a hole in the ground.

Another thing to avoid, according to The Guardian, is referring to Ireland as one of "the British Isles." Come on, you Irish, how long are you going to remain uptight about this, eh? Chill out, Ireland! (And please chill your beer while you're at it.) Of course, after hundreds of years of it being a British isle, it's understandable that tourists might still think of Ireland in those terms, geographically speaking. But watch out, the Irish don't like to be misunderstood. I knew an American girl who cut her hair in bangs, went to Dublin and told people her hairstyle was called "the Celtic fringe." She got the living daylight beaten out of her, but went home to Kentucky with an Irish husband and two cases of Guinness.

Up the proverbial creek

I tell you, there's nothing worse in the world than acting like an ethnocentric clod in a foreign country. And so I am offering you Seven Absolute No-nos for Living in Japan. If you don't take my advice, you will not only be seen as an

ethnocentric clod, but you may also find yourself up the proverbial creek with a job at Nova.

1. (This one is primarily for guys.) Never go out with a Japanese girl who speaks fluent Yiddish. She may seduce you with a mean pastrami sandwich, but once she's got you in her clutches, she'll bring her mother to live with you and you'll be eating pickled herring with wasabi until it's coming out of your ears.

2. (Now one mainly for women.) If you go to bed with a Japanese guy, for God's sakes don't call him a "technician." Even if he is a crack engineer with Hitachi, you shouldn't use the word "technician" to describe him, as it carries the connotation that perhaps he may be good only at formulaic sex. And learn a bit of Japanese before you take the plunge. *Zengi* is the word for "foreplay." Don't confuse it with *zeni*, which means both "goodwill" and "loose change." The result could be an international misunderstanding of enormous proportion.

3. Don't go on a date in toilet slippers. Some people do this, and it's fine if your date is similarly shod. But I strongly advise you against this. The reason is that if you leave these slippers by the restaurant step when you enter the eating area with your date, someone else is bound to use them when they go to the toilet there. Eventually your slippers will wear out and you'll have to buy new ones. It's a waste of good rubber.

4. Never open a present in front of the person who gave it to you. Many foreigners are pitifully guilty of this cardinal sin of Japanese gift-giving etiquette. The reason for the hoary tradition is simple: You may be given the very same item that you gave them some time before. Most gifts in Japan make the rounds three or four times before being stuffed in a closet or thrown away. Avoid embarrassment: Take the unwrapped gift home and just throw it away as is.

Now, if you have followed these rules, you are well on your way to becoming a real Japanese. But there are three more hard-and-fast parameters that govern everyday life in Japan. I warn you — ignore these at your peril. If you do, you run the risk of being branded non-Japanese, un-Japanese and anti-Japanese. You will then end up in some underpopulated village in the Japanese outback teaching English to 80-year-olds.

Shot on the front lawn

5. This one is important, now that Halloween is being celebrated here. Never go trick or treating dressed as Kim Jong Il. You won't get shot on the front lawn as you would be

in the United States, but you're bound to end up with a bagful of rotten kimchi. Dress up as Uncle Sam, however, and Japanese people will give you a lot of money just so they won't have to join you when you go around threatening their neighbors with "Treat, or we'll nuke you."

6. Never speak Japanese with a Japanese. This negates the only reason they are speaking with you in the first place — that is, to practice their English. If you must speak Japanese, use only five expressions: *hai* (OK, whatever you say); *a so* (uh-huh); *naruhodo* (yeah, sure); *honto?* (really?); and *iwarete miru to so ka mo shiremasen* (well, when you put it like that, I can see the wisdom of your words). Not only will this make you very popular with the Japanese, but it will seem like you are fluent in the language, for these five expressions have been shown to comprise 73 percent of all Japanese spoken during an average day.

Finally, this one is the most crucial — and if you don't follow my instructions to the letter, I cannot be responsible for your future in any country.

7. Never — and I mean *never* — go home to your country and act like a Japanese. Bowing, sucking in your saliva, apologizing for things that aren't your fault (unless you're British), slurping spaghetti, trying to stop your best friend's 8-year-old son from doing crayon drawings on your walls, driving through crosswalks with pedestrians in them (this can be terminally complicating), and telling your spouse that you won't be home for dinner for the next 18 years may all endear you to your Japanese hosts (who may praise you as being "more Japanese than the Japanese"), but you will have become that most dreaded of individuals: the *gaijin* (foreigner) in your own land.

No one loves a cosmopolitan clod. So, just be yourself — or yourselves, as the case may well be.

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