

JUST BE CAUSE

The loneliness of the long-distance foreigner

By DEBITO ARUDOU

A few months ago I had beers with several old Japan-hand guys (combined we have more than a century of Japan experiences), and one of them asked an interesting question:

"After all our years here, how many close Japanese male friends do you have?" (Excluding Debito, of course.)

We glanced amongst ourselves and realized that none of us had *any*. Not one we would count on as a

"friend." Nobody to whom we could talk openly, unreservedly, and in depth with, about what's on our minds. Or contact for a place to stay because our spouse was on the warpath. Or call at 3 a.m. to announce the birth of our latest baby. Or ring up on the spur of the moment because we didn't want to drink alone that evening. Or who would care enough to check on us in the event of a natural disaster. Not one.

This occasioned much discussion and theorizing, both at the



table and on my blog later (see www.debito.org/?p=8933)

(A quick note to readers already poised to strike with poison pens: None of the following theories are necessarily mine, nor do I necessarily agree with them. They are just to stimulate further discussion.)

One theory was that Japanese salarymen of our age group are generally boring people. Too busy or work-oriented to cultivate outside interests or hobbies, these one-note-Taros generally "talk shop" or resort to shaggy-dog stories about food. We contrasted them with Japanese women, who, thanks to more varied lifestyles and interests (including travel, language and culture), are more engaging and make better conversation partners (even if, my friends hastily added, the relationship had not become physical).

Another idea was that for many Japanese men, their hobby *was* you. By this, the speaker meant the culture vultures craving the "*gaijin shiriai* experience" or honing their language skills. This was OK in the beginning (especially when we first got here) but it got old quickly, as they realized we wanted to learn Japanese too, and when they weren't willing to reciprocate. Not to mention that we eventually got tired of hearing blanket cultural explanations for individual issues (which is how culture vultures are hard-wired to see the world, anyway).

Another theory was that after a certain age, Japanese men don't make "friends" with anyone. The few lifelong friends they would ever make were in school; once they entered the job market, all other males were treated as rivals or steps to promotion — meaning you put up a mask and didn't reveal potentially compromising personal information. Thus if Japanese men were going to make friends at all, they were going to make them permanently, spending enormous time and energy imprinting themselves on precious few people. This meant they had to choose wisely, and non-Japanese — generally seen as in Japan only temporarily and with unclear loyalties — weren't worth the emotional investment.

Related to this were issues of Japan's hierarchical society. Everyone was either subordinate or superior — *kōhai* or *senpai* — which interfered with friendships as the years marched on: Few non-Japanese (NJ) wanted to languish as *kōhai*, and few Japanese wanted to deal with a foreign *senpai*. Besides, went the theory, this relationship wasn't something

we'd classify as a "friendship" anyway. Conclusion: Japanese men, as opposed to Japanese women with their lifetime coffee klatches, were some of the most lonely people on the planet.

Another suggestion was that this was just part of how life shakes down. Sure, when you're young and carefree you can hang out willy-nilly, spend money with abandon and enjoy the beer-induced bonhomie (which Japan's watering holes are very good at creating) with everyone all night. But as time goes on and people get married, have kids, take on a mortgage and a nagging spouse (who doesn't necessarily want you spending their money on your own personal fun, especially if it involves friends of the opposite sex), you prioritize, regardless of nationality.

Fine, our group countered, but we've all been married and had kids, and yet we're still meeting regularly — because NJ priorities include beers with friends from time to time. In fact, for us the older the relationship gets, the more we want to maintain it — especially given all we've been through together. "New friends are silver, but old friends are gold."

Still another, intriguing theory was the utilitarian nature of Japanese relationships, i.e. Japanese make friends not as a matter of course but with a specific purpose in mind: shared lifestyles, interests, sports-team fandom, what have you. But once that purpose had run its course — because you've exhausted all conversation or lost the commonality — you should *expect* to lose contact. The logic runs that in Japan it is awkward, untoward, even rude to extend a relationship beyond its "natural shelf life." This goes even just for moving to another city in Japan: Consider it normal to lose touch with everyone you leave behind. The thread of camaraderie is that thin in Japan.

However, one naturalized Japanese friend of mine (who just turned 70) pooh-poohed all these theories and took me out to meet his drinking buddies (of both genders, mostly in their 60s and 70s themselves). At this stage in their lives things were less complicated. There were no love triangles, no senpai-kōhai conceits, no "shop talk," because they were all retired. Moreover they were more outgoing and interesting, not only because they were cultivating pastimes to keep from going senile, but also because the almighty social lubricant of alcohol was omnipresent (they drank like there was no tomorrow; for some of them, after all, there might not be!). For

my friend, getting Japanese to lower their masks was pretty easy.

Fine, but I asked if it weren't a bit unreasonable for us middle-aged blokes to wait for this life stage just to make some Japanese friends. These things may take time, and we may indeed have to spend years collecting shards of short interactions from the local greengrocer before we put together a more revealing relationship. But in the meantime, human interaction with at least one person of the same gender that goes beyond platitudes, and hopefully does not require libation and liver damage, is necessary now for sanity's sake, no?

There were other, less-developed theories, but the general conclusion was: Whatever expectation one had of "friends" — either between Japanese and NJ, or between Japanese themselves — there was little room over time for overlap. Ultimately NJ-NJ relationships wound up being more friendly, supportive and long-lasting.

Now it's time for disclaimers: No doubt the regular suspects will vent their spleen to our Have Your Say section and decry this essay as overgeneralizing, bashing, even discriminating against Japanese men.

Fire away, but you'd be missing the point of this column. When you have a good number of NJ long-termers saying they have few to no long-term Japanese friends, this is a very serious issue — with a direct connection to issues of immigration and assimilation of outsiders. It may be a crude barometer regarding life in Japan, but let's carry on the discussion anyway and see how sophisticated we can make it.

So let's narrow this debate down to one simple question: As a long-term NJ resident in Japan, how many Japanese friends do *you* have, as defined in the introduction above? (You might say that you have no relationship with anyone of any nationality with that much depth, but that's awfully lonely — I dare say even unhealthy — and I hope you can remedy that.) Respondents who can address the other sides of the question (i.e. NJ women befriending Japanese women/men, and same-sex relationships) are especially welcome, as this essay has a shortage of insight on those angles.

Be honest. And by "honest", I mean giving this question due consideration and experience: People who haven't been living

in Japan for, say, about 10 years, seeing how things shake down over a significant portion of a lifetime's arc, should refrain from commentary and let their senpai speak. "I've been here one year and have oodles of Japanese friends, you twerpski!" just isn't a valid sample yet. And please come clean about your backgrounds when you write in, since age, gender, occupation, etc. all have as much bearing on the discussion as your duration of time in Japan.

Above all, remember what my job as a columnist is: to stimulate public discussion. Respondents are welcome to disagree (I actually consider agreement from readers to be an unexpected luxury), but if this column can at least get you to think, even start clacking keyboards to The Japan Times, I've done my job. Go to it. Consider yourself duly stimulated, and please offer us some friendly advice.

Debito Arudou's new novel "In Appropriate" is on sale (www.debito.org/inappropriate.html) Twitter [arudoudebito](https://twitter.com/arudoudebito). Send your comments to community@japantimes.co.jp

The Japan Times: Tuesday, Aug. 2, 2011
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