

MARK LEE FORD

“We Japanese”

(or “How to Liberate Yourself from Foreigners at the Office”)



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Shiori, a middle-aged Japanese woman, works as marketing director at a foreign-capital insurance company in Tokyo. She has been stewing in a pot of office battles between the foreign and Japanese employees for months. The bane of her existence: foreign expat colleagues who do not understand the Japanese Way.

In this short story, Shiori seeks advice from a Japanese colleague on how to rid herself of the foreigner problem without having to quit her job. The prescription for action that her Japanese colleague gives her is 100% effective, legal...and shocking.

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EDITED BY

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THE MONEO COMPANY

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“Inoue-san, the foreigners are causing us so much trouble!” lamented Shioiri, a marketing director at the Japanese local headquarters of an American global insurance company. Flummoxed by her co-workers from overseas, Shiori had a tone of futility in her plea to me for help.

She continued, “We Japanese bend over backwards to accommodate them. But foreigners will never understand our Japanese Way. They don’t even try to speak Japanese, but force me to speak English in my own country. This is Japan, not New York City!”

Shiori reluctantly squeezed-out a compliment: “Socially foreigners can be fun,” but then quickly complained that “They’ve made my professional life miserable.”

Shiori craves to rid herself of her foreign co-workers. For months, she has been stewing in a pot of office battles between expats and Japanese employees. Disagreements about direction and execution have delayed projects. The associated cost overruns have been accumulating to the point that performance bonuses and promotions are starting to hang in the balance.

Moreover, Shiori is embarrassed and frustrated with herself when it comes to English. She feels that she can neither express herself adequately nor fully understand what is being said around her. Even brushing shoulders with English-language situations causes her anxiety.

“I can’t quit. I need the money. Anyway, why should I be the one to leave?!”

Perhaps your story resembles hers.

Twelve years ago, straight from college, Shiori joined a well-regarded Japanese insurance company. After having been groomed to function in all-Japanese work environment, Shiori, as with the rest of her Japanese colleagues, were shocked to learn that one of the largest insurers in the world, an American company headquartered in New York, was to buy her company after it had fallen on hard times. She now answers to a foreign boss—an expat new to Japan—and must work in integrated teams of Japanese and non-Japanese people. Par for the course, English is the *lingua franca*, inescapably so.

Any Japanese person who has worked in a foreign company having substantial operations in Japan knows all too well about the attendant problems.

Americans are particularly hard to understand; they talk too fast, fill the air with words and jargon, and never get to the point. They want to revolutionize everything overnight without first taking time to understand why things are the way they are in the company. Rules and precedent are their enemies. Their approach tends to be high-handed; teacher has come from America to teach the Japanese the errors of their ways and to straighten them out. And even on the outside chance that one or two of the ideas are sound, expats have a lousy record of leading execution in Japan. No matter how one slices the problem, the expats come out on top.

“I am loyal and hard-working,” Shiori told me. “It wouldn’t be so bad if they’d come up with a plan that actually made some

sense. I would get onboard. But their modernization plans are bunk. I'll tell you the reality. They are ladening us with meaningless projects and tasks while demanding that we keep-up with our regular, daily work. None of us were hired for this sort of thing. Our workloads are doubling, maybe even tripling. For what?! My pay has not changed, and we probably will not get any bonuses this year. They are squeezing blood from a stone to line their own pockets, firing people in operations to cut costs, then collecting fat bonuses for themselves afterward. And have you noticed how much customer complaints have shot up during this circus?"

Shiori's rising voice caught a fleeting glance from a co-worker passing near our desks. I nodded enthusiastically to Shiori in hopes to bring the conversation to a close quickly and spare me the embarrassment from attracting more attention. In fairness to her, her comments were accurate albeit emotionally expressed. Righteous anger.

"Expats are political animals, out for themselves. I am sick of their speeches about stakeholder engagement and employee satisfaction. Hypocrites! They are here to make a fast buck and have a good time. How many times have we seen this?! They'll kick up a dust storm, then run away home to America. But we're the ones left with their bill. We have to clean up their damage. For what? Just in time for the next batch of these clowns in the hopper to land on our necks!"

Shiori's point about money especially stings because of the enormous gap in compensation between the regular Japanese employees and foreign expats, be they executives or not. It is an open wound for all the Japanese employees, one that never

heals, and a constant bitter reminder that it is “us versus them” in our own company...in our homeland. We sometimes wonder how the situation would be if the roles were reversed, that is to say, if we were the expats in the New York headquarters and the Americans had to take orders from us at a tenth of our compensation. Of course, it would never fly over there.

I was becoming tired. All of Shiori’s points are valid, but everything she said is a well-trodden path. Every Japanese employee, including me, knows the situation inside and out and has all of the same points in common. But griping to each other about the same thing every day without any solution is just as demoralizing as dealing with the zaniness of the expats.

“I have to put up with their nonsense for ¥750,000 per month. Meanwhile, my American boss gets ten times my salary, not counting his bonuses, sports car, a palatial condo, membership at the Tokyo American Club, and tuition for each of his children at a posh private school. He comes and goes to the office as he pleases, as do they all. Even the foreign non-executives—the managers and programmers—are on expat deals or international packages. Our company is not rolling in cash to pay for these luxuries. Poor financial performance got us into this mess in the first place.”

She implored me, “Inoue-san, please tell me what I should do?!”

This was the setting for Shiori’s prizefight. The lines were drawn between expats and Japanese. Everyone ages ago had anchored into their respective positions including the lackeys and sympathizers on each side.

I am coasting into retirement, and have no intention to rock the boat. Employees, be they foreign or Japanese, are free to change whatever they want to change in the company—after I retire. Being all things to all people is keeping me sane and more or less free of conflict. Some of the foreigners even use me as a sounding board, even as a confidante, to get the pulse of the Japanese staff.

I was about to commiserate with her for the umpteenth time as had become the habit of all Japanese employees with each other. A memory of life in our company before the Americans had arrived flashed across my mind and stopped me. Having worked with foreigners in several other companies during my career, I have seen the gamut of outcomes, from successful to disastrous, albeit mostly mediocre as is presumably the case of most companies be they Japanese or American.

As I paused my obsequious nodding, Shiori picked-up on something. An inkling crossed her face. Perhaps she sensed that our conversation was going to be more than just another round of quasi-therapeutic commiseration with a comrade-in-arms.

I assured Shiori that she could liberate herself from foreigners. Who knows, she might even be able to get even, too. Shiori leaned forward and listened intently as I slowly began to outline her game-plan:

1. remind the foreigner incessantly that Japan is unique and, because of that, Japanese people require exceptional consideration and sensitive treatment for the sake of, well, just us being “Japanese”;
2. pontificate to the foreigner that Japanese business is too complicated and nuanced for him to understand;

3. stymie any changes that the foreigner undertakes—no matter how small—until his expatriate assignment ends;
4. agree with the foreigner's direction during meetings with him, then hold an all-Japanese meeting afterward to decide the actual direction that everyone will take; and
5. marshal all resources to preserve the Japanese status quo in the company.

And for the coup de grace:

6. wallow in process.

Shiori flushed, then bristled, as would a two pack-a-day smoker after having being admonished to quit cold-turkey. "You are mocking me!"

Despite her grumblings about foreigners, Shiori considers herself to be fair-minded.

"Not at all," I said. "My prescription has been proven countless times."

"Countless?"

"Well, as least as long as foreigners have been showing up on our shores to do business. Follow my prescription daily for best results. I guarantee that you will liberate yourself from your foreign overseers quickly."

She scoffed.

I went on to say that when the foreigner arrives in Japan, he is preoccupied with orienting himself and his family toward their new life here. Much of what he does is connected with personal matters, such as setting-up a bank account, renting an apartment, and helping his children to settle into school. He also has an endless string of social events and touristy outings

on his calendar. All of this is time-consuming and distracting, and does not allow him to penetrate what is going on at the office.

To compound the distraction, deep in his honeymoon period with Japan, our helpfulness and politeness beguile the foreigner. He finds himself, for example, comparing the crippling shortcomings of customer service in his home country to what works flawlessly in ours. He might also take a light touch at the office so as to be culturally sensitive to us. He sincerely wants to understand us, the company, and everything else that is new around him so he can do a good job. After all, he has a boss, too, and he knows that his promotion to becoming a regional director or even a global director is in the wings after his Japan assignment ends.

But as his honeymoon wanes, he notices incongruities between what we say and what we do. How do we really work? How do we really treat each other? Our explanations about how things work in Japan, and our tall tales to justify our lack of progress at work, begin to fall apart.

“So you’re saying that we’re lying to them,” said Shiori.

“No, Shiori-san, we are not lying. At least not to them.”

Ideologies about ourselves

We are indoctrinated with ideologies about ourselves from childhood, long before we have the rational ability to neutralize the infection—a cognitive contagion or “virus of the mind”, as is popularly called today, passed from generation to generation from time immemorial. And because the contagion is so old,

we succumb to arguments from authority about its correctness as it pertains to our very own self-identities. Beyond being simply authentic in our minds, the ideologies infuse us with an instinctive righteousness about who we are and how we should act. Without even so much as a fleeting thought, we shut out logic and objective truths whenever they run contrary to the ideologies.

All people in all cultures are infected by this cognitive contagion to various degrees. Japanese people are the same as any other person from anywhere in the world, and from any time in the world, be they from modern Nigeria or ancient Greece. As *homo sapiens*, how could Japanese people be otherwise? And, as with the Japanese people, no group has any special immunity, yet each considers his group special—usually better—than all others. We easily see the contagion at work on people of other cultures, but because of the contagions' deceptive nature, it is next to impossible to see it in our own culture—in ourselves.

To overcome this viral ideological indoctrination, one has to develop the intellectual acumen to be able to recognize the ideology, then have the courage to do something about it. Few people can do the former; almost nobody, the latter. The practical ways to overcome this situation are limited. One is to remove oneself from one's own ideological environment and immerse oneself in someone else's (i.e., live overseas) so as to neutralize the cues of constant reinforcement of the ideology. Another is to be exposed to someone from outside our ideology—a foreigner, especially one with power over us, in our Japanese office.

Whenever the foreigner does not seem to understand us, we become frustrated, and we project our frustration onto him. We end-up blaming him, perhaps even go so far as to demonize him, his race, and/or his culture.

The foreigner is, however, merely a catalyst that inadvertently (and usually clumsily) debunks our ideologies before our eyes. We sense that something is wrong, yet we are so besotted with our ideologies—and our judgement is, therefore, so clouded—that we immediately jump to the incorrect conclusion that the foreigner is wronging us. The illumination by the foreigner of the falsehoods of our ideologies, and our inability to reconcile the incongruity between objective facts and our quasi-religious beliefs cause our frustration. All of this frustrates the foreigner, too. Like so, conflict at the office arises.

What are the most egregious aspects of these ideologies about ourselves?

Myth 1: The Japanese Way

Japanese people are of numerous, diverse cultures.

There are as many Japanese ‘ways’ as there are Japanese people. There never has been one “Japanese Way,” certainly nothing of the kind that the Japanese nationalist demagogues promote. Yet, many of us habitually invoke the name of the great Japanese Way—sufficiently malleable and ill-defined to exploit as a cudgel in any situation—to stymie foreigners and, more so (unsurprisingly), to use against other Japanese people to get what we want from them.

The story of Japan is not a tidy, seamless, idealized history of continuity from antiquity to the 21st Century of some kind of racially and culturally homogeneous “Japanese people.” Japan has always been constituted of peoples of diverse cultures, foreign and domestic, who have been busily integrating, hybridizing, assimilating, balkanizing, and otherwise interacting in all sorts of complicated ways over millennia in the geographic area that is, for now, referred to as “Japan.” The true story of the people of the archipelago is fascinating and sublime, and is far removed from the boring, nationalist ideological narrative of “We Japanese.”

What is the outcome of those who use “The Japanese Way” as a cudgel in the office?

We constantly disagree amongst ourselves. But whenever we disagree with a foreigner, we band together to accuse him of not understanding our ineffably sublime Japanese Way. Cannot our disagreements with the foreigner be attributed to the same reason as disagreements between ourselves, that is, two humans having different opinions?

We cripple ourselves whenever we reduce disagreements to the absurd simplicity of Japanese versus foreigners. Ironically, we—not the foreigner—create a repugnant stereotype of ourselves by adhering stubbornly to this ideology. We voluntarily discard crucial advantage by discarding our diversity in favor of a truly inane caricature for foreign consumption: “We Japanese.”

The Japanese Way is an insidious self-deception. Many of us wholeheartedly believe the ideology; others know the contrivance, and the more astute among us exploit the zealotry

of dimwit ideologies among our countrymen for selfish gain (see Epilogue).

Myth 2: Japanese decide in consensus

We are forever trying to convince ourselves and foreigners that Japanese people make decisions as a group. We preach consensus. To compound the problem, foreigners sincerely study concepts such as *nemawashi* in an attempt to work better with us.

In reality, we are confusing “deciding in consensus” with “laboring in consensus.”

When you have had reservations about the direction set by your superior regarding a project or deliverable, have you had the courage to withhold your *hanko* seal from the string of others that are already on an approval sheet? Of course you haven’t.

We rarely make consensus-based decisions of any consequence because a senior strongman always decides the direction for us, and then we dutifully follow him. We know the price of disobedience. So we manufacture a contrived appearance of propriety by acting out a phony show of diligence. We undertake endless discussions and analyses about the direction, wringing our hands over minutiae, thereby protracting the time and cost of the direction tenfold.

At the end of our song and dance show, however, the conclusion of the grand consensus-building effort always conforms to whatever direction the boss had “suggested” weeks,

if not months, beforehand—a direction that everyone has always known and from which people veer only at their peril.

When the foreigner sees this inanity, he becomes confused. He believes our ideologies perhaps even more than we do. Every book that he has read and seminar that he has attended about doing business in Japan espouses them. Nobody has told him that he is working in a feudal hierarchy because we fail to recognize it ourselves.

Myth 3: We are inscrutable to foreigners

Our people have been stuck on an island for a long, long time.

Only recently in our history have travel and communication for the masses been unrestricted within Japan, as has exchange of information with other countries. Historical isolation has contributed to our exaggerated opinion of ourselves as being inscrutable to foreigners.

To compound the problem, we are crippled by our gross inability to communicate in English. In fact, we do not even want to learn English. We have deliberately, even proudly, severed ourselves from the free flow of ideas with the rest of humanity, essentially cutting off our noses to spite our faces. Our offices are littered with proud Salarymen who cannot string two sentences in English together properly; our tonguetied political leaders are sidelined at global summits. We bury our heads in repetitious processes for our entire careers and do not even communicate between departments in our own companies in our own language, let alone with people globally in English.

Despite this situation, we have the temerity and arrogance to boast that we are too inscrutable to be understood by foreigners.

The correct question is not “Can the foreigner understand the inscrutable Japanese?” Rather, they are “Do we understand the objective realities of the 21st Century globally. How can collaborate with the rest of humanity to our advantage?”

What happens whenever a foreigner presents an idea that the rest of the planet can grasp instantly, but confounds us? We feel threatened. Our pride is stung. So we wrap ourselves in ideologies about our identities, chiding the foreigner about his supposed ignorance about Japan, then ridiculing him among ourselves when he is out of earshot.

If coherent, intelligent explanations are given to the foreigner, then everything about Japan is straightforward to understand. Japanese processes, systems, regulations, customers, and everything else about us are comprehensible to anyone from any culture. Foreigners can and do understand our culture. Foreigners can and do learn our language.

In fact, the savvy foreigner ends-up understanding all of these things much better than we do. Our intransigence frustrates him, which feeds his cynicism and discredits us. Foreigners begin to see us as obstinate, and we become their laughingstocks.¹

¹ The inept foreigner who wants to curry favor with us further deludes us. He becomes our sycophant and spouts the same ideologies to other foreigners as we do.

Myth 4: Harmony

Of all the ideologies, *wa*² or harmony, is the most injurious.

Wa comes gift-wrapped in a Japanese-style package, but *wa* is not specific to Japan. Taking on numberless guises, *wa* is the preferred weapon of despots and demagogues in all cultures throughout history—whether they run a country, a company, or a family—to usurp the individual sovereignty. It is the ultimate justification for egregious behaviors. And, for that reason, it is the most efficacious ideology for those who know how to use it to their advantage against others.

Society does not have values. Groups do not have values. Only individuals can have values because only individuals can have individual sovereignty. Values start and end with the individual. This is contrary to the invidious ideology that purports that groups have values; we hear exhortations to do things “for the good of the group,” “for the harmony of the group,” and so on, all of which are impossible.

Wa empowers one man in the group to reap all the benefits that the other members of the group individually sacrifice in the wrongheaded belief that it is good for everyone. And that is the mark of a true ideology. The true believers are injured and see the injury to themselves with their own eyes, believe the injury to be good, then continue to defend and promulgate the ideology to their ruination or even death.

² The peaceful unity and conformity within a social group, in which members prefer the continuation of a harmonious community over their personal interests

For those with the guts to look honestly, Japanese society is replete with the destructiveness of wa: in hospitals, schools, research institutes, universities, families, and many other institutions...including Shiori’s office and, perhaps, yours.

How can all of this be so?

It is because that, just as we confuse laboring in consensus with making consensus-based decisions, we confuse harmony with order.

Japanese offices are filled with broken people: abusive seniors, bullies, disgruntled workers, power harassers, s e x u a l harassers, and their countless victims. Mental illness, depression, and suicide are rampant.

Despite this chaos, Japanese offices are remarkably orderly.

Whereas an American will file a formal complaint, strike, or even sue, we choose to suffer in silence. We are indoctrinated to believe that quiet endurance of tribulation is a virtue for the sake of wa. Our lives are governed by process, and proper execution of process must preserve order and obedience above all. We have been programmed with the virus of the mind to turn off our brain—really, our morality, ethics, and humanity—to follow the rule, even if the outcome will be disastrous. Break the rule to do the right thing, however, and a black mark will be put on our name. We voluntarily sacrifice our individual sovereignty daily at the altar of order.

The veracity of these comments is easily proven with one test question. For all the sacrifices that we unceasingly make for the so-called greater good of the group, how many of us can claim that we enjoy a state of harmony with our peers or, most important, contentment for ourselves, let alone freedom?

Like many of the other ideologies, wa is a bitter legacy inherited from millennia of feudalism, optimized throughout social classes for military efficacy and not for safeguarding the individual sovereignty of each citizen.

When we throw a foreigner into this environment, especially one in which he must work for a bully, then berate him with how he is out of tune with Japanese harmony, of course he will stridently resist us. The severity is even more acute for him than us; we sacrificed our basic freedom to the ideologies ages ago, whereas he still has his and is now on the line.

Myth 5: “This is my company.”

Unless you own stock (and plenty of it), “your” company is not yours nor will it ever be. You are an expendable tool—a human resource—that owners use to run their machine. You are expected to produce more wealth for the company than for what they compensate your labor.

Do not be beguiled by the trappings of lifetime employment, such as stability of income and benefits. You buy those things many times over by sacrificing your sovereignty daily in the abnormality of your work. Think of the priceless hours of your finite lifespan that you squander daily: two hours on an insufferably crowded commuter train, marathon meetings dominated by a garrulous senior strongman, the bullying of yourself (or your bullying of others), and a plethora of other purposeless miseries, large and small.

What now for Shiori?

Shiori’s pride, rooted in her personality insecurities and wrapped in her false ideologies of Japanese identity, compels her to lash out at her foreign co-workers. But her problems actually originate within her, and are merely provoked by the foreigner.

Peace for Shiori and productivity for her company depend on Shiori’s ability to understand herself and the reality of her ideological predicament before she attempts to understand the foreigner. And, on the small chance that she can do this, she then must have the courage to actually do something about it.

Liberating ourselves from foreigners is really a story of how we can free ourselves from the yoke of our ideologies. The lesson is to understand our human irrationality, rather than play a part in the ancient and absurd theater of Japanese versus foreigners. It applies to us even if we never meet a foreigner once during our entire career. The ideologies are more pathological for Japanese dealing with Japanese than they are between Japanese and foreigners. At some point, the foreigner goes home. We, however, as Japanese are pretty much stuck with each other.

Feudalistic dysfunction benefits neither you nor your company. Break free! Establish a meaningful and fulfilling path for yourself by doing the right thing at the office. Shatter the ideologies. Do not wallow in the slovenliness of office bureaucracy, nourished by intellectually lazy individuals who hide behind such ideologies or by those who exploit the

ideologies against you for personal gain at the price of your individual sovereignty.

“I suppose I agree with some of what you said,” Shiori conceded. “But, Inoue-san, you only complained about things that we do wrong. It’s too one-sided. What about all the ideologies that the Americans, Brits, Indians and all the rest of them bring to the office?”

“They bring plenty of their own ideological baggage, Shiori-san. But we need to understand the reality of our own predicament, then have the courage to do something about it, before we can attempt to influence anyone else, be they foreign or Japanese.”

“I never thought of it that way.”

A few months later, Shiori got an opportunity to put her new understanding to use. The American parent carved-out the Japan operations and sold it to a large Asian insurer. Shortly afterward, her marketing department received a token gift of sweets from the new executive management team.

“Damn,” she muttered under her breath as she tore open the wrapper. “I *hate* Chinese mooncakes. You want them?”

Taking one, I smirked, thinking of the one card in business that trumps everything: “He who has the pesos, has the say-so’s.”

Epilogue

Who exploits the ideologies for personal gain?

They come from the ranks of senior strongmen: directors, general managers, and their zealous protégés. Such men have grown up in their companies and have hired most of the staff in their departments. Employees look to them for leadership, wisdom, and guidance. Strongmen stand the most to benefit from the status quo of office feudalism, and guzzle the prestige and power in their fiefdoms. Their identities are derived largely from their corporate lives.

The foreign boss is the single biggest threat to a strongman’s status and psyche. The strongman does not fear change per se. Rather, he bristles at the prospect of the rationale for the change being revealed. The reason: for decades he has enjoyed a fat salary and benefits, yet accomplished nothing, and all at the expense of his staff. He is far behind the global competitors.

It is profoundly unsettling for the strongman to discover that he has squandered his life—slogging at the office daily while sacrificing a relationship with his family—for naught. But the real comeuppance is the potential to lose his control over the lives of his staff. When a foreign boss uncovers the situation, the strongman feels humiliated and vulnerable.

So, he retaliates by stalling any initiative for change proffered by the foreign boss and establishes a covert autonomous Japanese organization within the foreign boss’ organization.

By doing so, the strongman adopts a crusader’s sense of righteousness. Intellectually lazy followers are all too eager to

rally behind him (or his middle-management protégé), thoughtlessly nestling in the ideologies. Meanwhile, staff morale tumbles, as do the company's finances. The personal agenda of the instigator prevails at the expense of everyone around him.

If you are looking to preserve your empire until you coast into retirement, then this is the way to go. The strongman usually prevails at the expense of the company and his staff; the foreign boss eventually repatriates.

You also become the target for firing by the foreign senior leaders when they uncover the situation and have the courage to take action.

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