

Blending Japanese and Chinese Society

Hu Xinwei

Gaman (Patience)

After finishing graduate school in Japan in 1992, I was hired by a Japanese company wanting to gain ground in China, but my first job at the company was not in my own field. Instead, I was assigned to soldering electronic parts. At first, I thought this assignment was worthless and the company would save money by hiring local part-timers instead of a Chinese MA graduate. In China, state institutions and corporations hire graduates and assign them to positions in their fields where they are promoted according to their work experience.

However, it was not the same in Japan. At first, I worried whether I could adjust to this different corporate philosophy. After a long period of self-questioning, I decided to adopt the principle of 'when in Rome, do as the Romans do.' After 6 months of enduring the blue solder haze and getting good at soldering, I was transferred to another division to study planning and management. Finally, after 3 years I was assigned to a local subsidiary in China to help develop the Chinese market. It was then that I realized the last 3 years, had not been worthless because I gained knowledge about the company's business from the ground up.

Of course, each company has a different training philosophy for employees but many Japanese companies commonly give their employees assignments in different fields to give them wide experience and encourage adaptability.

This is quite unlike China where people usually remain working in the same environment for their entire life. As a result, they cannot develop new skills, and do not become more valuable to their employers. For example, after graduating from a Chinese university in 1982, I was lucky to be hired by the Chinese Railway Ministry, but never really gained a wide knowledge of railways because I always worked in the same division.

I feel Chinese companies could learn a valuable lesson from Japanese companies in this regard and that foreigners like me need to be patient with the many differences in Japanese business practices.

My Friendly Friend

I have a Japanese friend whom I met about 18 years ago through business. Normally, after friends return home, some letters are exchanged at New Year and other holidays but the relationship fades as time passes. But this particular friend was not the same. The late 1980s were a golden

age for Japan–China exchanges and working in the international division at the Chinese Railway Ministry where I was using my Japanese language skills, I was more than happy to accept his friendship. After quitting my job in China in the autumn of 1988, I came to Japan to study. I had no knowledge of Japan and had many problems with finding housing and part-time jobs, and getting a visa, etc.

My friend helped me with house hunting and became my guarantor for renting a small room, even bringing important items like pots and pans from his home after I moved in. The summer of 1989 was extraordinarily hot and my room had no air conditioning so it was like a sauna. One day, my friend appeared at the doorstep carrying a new electric fan while it was more than 35°C outside. My eyes were filled with tears of gratitude and joy because I never expected my friend to be worried about me. The life of a foreign student is not easy and most are forced to choose buying text books rather than an electric fan. Renewing a study visa is a burden too. When I tried to enter graduate school to study a different subject, the Japanese immigration officer noted the apparent inconsistency and would not allow me to extend my visa. I was horror struck that I would be forced to return to China without achieving my goal. After



Author examining manufacturing quality at local Chinese company

(Author)



Author (left) enjoying cold beer with Japanese friends during hot summer of 1989

(Author)



Author and his son at Osaka Castle

(Author)



The Hu family in front of Fuji TV Head Office in Odaiba, Tokyo

(Author)

learning of my situation, my friend took time off to go to the Immigration Office and explain my situation. He also consulted an immigration lawyer. It was due to his efforts that I eventually got the visa.

As I look back, I realized it cost my friend time and money to help me but although my friend was not wealthy, he never mentioned the cost. There are no words to express how much his support helped me and how it changed my perception of Japan and her people. This story is even more poignant because now my friend is unemployed due to the long recession in Japan.

Education

Chinese friends in China have an 8-year-old child on whom they spend almost every spare penny for education. In addition to normal school homework, they hire a tutor to give private lessons and send the child to a cram school at weekends to study math and English. This is not uncommon in urban China.

I too have an 8-year-old son here in Japan

and when I ask him why he goes to school, he says 50% to study and 50% to play with friends. When he comes home, he dumps his school bag and rushes off to play. Usually, the homework is just 1 page and only takes a few minutes. When I compare his situation with that of my friend's child back in China, I wonder if it is OK.

Japanese families are famous for their dedication to their children's education, but I believe my son's lifestyle is average for a Japanese 8-year old. There are quite a number of Chinese families living in Japan today and when the parents decide to go back to China, their children get overwhelmed by homework and extra lessons night and day, so they soon lose their happy smiles.

Like any other family, we do have expectations for our son's future but I have concerns about the high level of competition in China and the decline in academic achievement in Japan.

Ultimately, rather than be brilliant academically, I want my son to be a kind and caring person taking the best from the Chinese and Japanese cultures to build bridges and further understanding between our two societies. ■



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