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# Ourselves writ strange

## **Abstract**

As I consider what it is I most want to say in this brief essay, I realize that it is almost February and, essay marking aside, the winter term of teaching has come to an end. Already, after only four months in Tokyo, it is with some difficulty that I recall the first impressions of a stranger in a strange land; but the sense of achievement when I negotiated my way in, through and out of Shibuya station on my own is still palpable (and faintly ridiculous – I am after all a fully grown adult).

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## 特別寄稿

## Ourselves Writ Strange

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As I consider what it is I most want to say in this brief essay, I realize that it is almost February and, essay marking aside, the winter term of teaching has come to an end. Already, after only four months in Tokyo, it is with some difficulty that I recall the first impressions of a stranger in a strange land; but the sense of achievement when I negotiated my way in, through and out of Shibuya station on my own is still palpable (and faintly ridiculous – I am after all a fully grown adult). On occasion I still feel the thrill of breasting the massive wave of people and swimming my way against the tide without a falter or a bump to the ticket gate. But sometimes when I slap down my PASMO with nonchalance (I'm not a tourist) I feel like a chastened child when the gate rejects me (for I have perhaps become too cocksure and slap too briefly): I am literally shocked out of the smoothness of flow with an abruptness that brings me to a standstill (and causes a pile-up of those in my wake).

Of course I am still a stranger and I cannot afford to become complacent, but it is surprising how quickly, by establishing a routine, I have adapted to strangeness. The strange is now familiar, or maybe I mean, I have become familiar with strangeness. I no longer notice the babble of language I cannot understand or the visual signs of multiple languages I cannot read – that is until I journey outside my routine and am forced once again to recognize

my difference and my vulnerability: the train I am riding into the countryside does not broadcast the station names, the station names on the platforms are in Japanese and no translation is provided; the menu in the restaurant is written in Japanese and the waiters neither speak nor understand English. I am lost. I require assistance, but assistance I have discovered is always forthcoming, often before I have actively sought it, and I am both impressed by and grateful for the sensitivity, the kindness, the graciousness of 'the Japanese'. I am well on my way to creating a national stereotype based on purely personal, local and, it has to be admitted, very limited experience.

Stereotypes are best avoided and yet making sense of the world and my place within it depends upon a process of generalizing from the particular and extrapolating from the personal. I need to establish pattern, create a map – I need to make the strange familiar so that I can position myself on the map and in the pattern. But what I really need is an interactive map, a map that constantly reflects and responds to the changing world and my changing place within it. 'The man who never alters his opinion,' writes the English Romantic poet, William Blake, 'is like stagnant water, & breeds reptiles of the mind'<sup>1</sup>, which of course is part of the reason why I came to Japan. This is not to suggest that Australia is a stagnant pond (although crocodiles feature on the list of 'dangerous Australians')

but rather that any environment that becomes too familiar has the effect of stagnant water. Travel allows you to see a world previously only known to you by the accounts of others, from the perspective of personal lived experience – it breaks down stereotypes even as it replaces them with new ones – but at the least the stereotypes are your own! You discover, as remarked by Irish poet, Louis MacNeice, that the 'World is suddener than we fancy it. World is crazier and more of it than we think. Incurably plural.'<sup>2</sup> As I ride each day on the crowded train to work, the only visible foreigner (being tall, blond and pale-skinned), it strikes me how various the Japanese are – an amazing mix of physical types and facial characteristics that was completely unexpected. Rarely do I see the 'classic' Japanese face (a kind of identikit 'Geisha' face) I had expected. Travel to some degree exposes the gap between the imagined and the real, between the stereotype and the numerous particular; but perhaps more importantly, travel allows us to see ourselves and our own world from a different perspective: the familiar is made strange.

In the last class of the session I asked my lower-level undergraduate students to consider three questions: What had they learnt about Australia? What had they learnt about Japan? and what had they learnt about themselves? One by one they spoke about what they had learnt about Australia – primarily they had learnt about what it might be

like to be a stranger in a strange land (given the multi-ethnic ‘settlement’ of Australia), and for many what they had learnt about Japan was a recognition of difficulties encountered in the past, the present or a possible future in Japan by those marked as different. But to the question of what they had learnt about themselves, none could or would answer – they were either too reserved and the question too personal or it required more time for consideration. With only five minutes to go, I was just about to wrap up, when the only student missing from class rushed in. I asked him the same questions, to which he replied with incredulity marked on his face and in his voice (much to the hilarity of the rest of the class): “What did I learn about *JAPAN*? In *THIS* course?” (a course titled ‘Australia: the Dream and the Reality’). Given a moment to take the question seriously, he responded in much the same way as his fellow students: that is, he had learnt about the origins and the impact of discriminatory attitudes and practices both in Australia and in Japan. This particular student, when asked in the first class to consider what it was that marked him as himself – a question of identity more idiosyncratic than the shaping forces of family, ethnicity and nation that we had been discussing – replied that he liked the Chinese. Choosing to write his final essay on two poems written by Chinese Australians, as much to my surprise 8 of the 10 students did likewise, he concluded with this comment:

I came to feel the importance of ‘culture’. Having many cultures (and of course, many races) in one country creates a very difficult environment. For me, I live in Japan as one Japanese – just one of the vast majority. It is true that I feel some relief for being the majority in a

community (or a country). I have come to know that foreigners find it hard to live in Japan. Not only are there the language problems, but also a lot of cultural problems we Japanese cannot even come up with. I have some Chinese friends and so I decided to talk with them deeply and I want to know how they feel as a foreigner in Japan.

What I find particularly interesting (and yes, gratifying) about this comment, is the evident impact of reading literature in a foreign language and about a foreign culture: such reading not only reveals the expected differences and similarities to oneself and one’s own culture, but it can result in action; that is, the Romantic thesis about the value of imagination as a catalyst for personal and social change is here endorsed and realized. As Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote in his *Defence of Poetry*:

The great secret of morals is love; or a going out of our nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful, which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own. A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own. The great instrument of moral good is the imagination ... Poetry enlarges the circumference of the imagination...<sup>3</sup>

What might here be considered is not so much Shelley’s claim about the poet’s ability to employ imagination or about the general tendency of poetry to call upon the use of imagination in its readers, but that the ‘poetry’, or

literature, of one’s own culture might be less able to produce an enlargement of ‘the circumference of the imagination’ than that which renders the reader’s image strange to him or herself. Perhaps because I had talked about ‘Asian Australians’, particularly in reference to the infamous White Australia Policy that had been implemented initially to restrict immigration of the Chinese, but ultimately operated to restrict ‘Asian’ entry more broadly, the students had come to recognize themselves as ‘Asian’ – in the words of Australian poet, Judith Wright, they saw themselves ‘writ strange’.<sup>4</sup> As another student in the class remarked in his final essay:

From this poem, I thought that discrimination was really distressing. I often hear about discrimination like apartheid which white people employ against black people. However, because I have not experienced such kind of discrimination, I think about discrimination, feeling that ‘it does not concern me’. This poem had an effect on me because I am Asian too. That is to say, the thought that if Japanese people had been immigrants to Australia in exchange for Chinese people, Japanese people would be discriminated against now made me think as if I were a Chinese.

The student’s comment struck a chord with my recent reading of a chapter on ‘Literary Culture’ by Toshiko Ellis, written for *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Japanese Culture* (2009). Here she remarks on the ‘one area in Japanese literature that has been left largely unexplored to date’, that being ‘its relationship with other Asian cultures’. ‘Perhaps’, she continues, ‘as Japanese writers move away from the

Japan-West relationship, there will be room for them to look at their culture and history in relation to the cultures and histories of their neighbours<sup>5</sup>.

The situation in Australia is similar in the sense that the creative and critical milieu of Australian literature has also been dominated until relatively recently by (often fraught) relationship with Europe and America; yet Australia sits within the Asia Pacific and its history is entangled with (also often fraught) relationship to its Asian neighbours. The last ten to fifteen years has seen a significant shift in Australian acknowledgement of literary Asia both within and outside its borders (the publication of an anthology of Asian Australian writing edited by Chinese Cambodian Australian author, Alice Pung in 2008<sup>6</sup> being a significant marker of this shift). In conclusion then, I would return you to my students, and a final observation about Japan, prompted by the reading of a poem by Judith Wright (a fifth generation Australian of Anglo-Celtic origin) and a poem by a recent immigrant, Chinese Australian, Ouyang Yu<sup>7</sup>:

It might be too deep to read the exclusivity from the two poems, but after I read them, I felt the exclusiveness rather than loneliness and nostalgia.

I emphasise the exclusivity again and again in this essay because Japan has to face this exclusivity in order to survive in the global age. The exclusivity

which the two poems imply has linked to my thought that Japan should have not exclusivity but openness.

Take the population problem in Japan, for instance ...

The student goes on to outline why he believes 'openness' rather than a policy and practice of 'exclusivity' and 'exclusion' should be pursued politically, socially and culturally in Japan.

I have employed student observations in this essay in order to demonstrate a number of things, but let it first be said before I enumerate them that I did not coach the students toward these observations – the class was obviously designed to encourage them to consider their 'angle of vision'<sup>8</sup> but it was only in the final essay question that I asked them to reflect personally upon the literature with which they had been engaging throughout the session. The students' responses demonstrate to me that firstly, literature, and in particular, foreign literature or a literature in which you find yourself 'writ strange' has enormous power to change perceptions and attitudes; that secondly, 'Japanese students' do not conform to the 'Asian education produces students who pass exams parrot fashion but can't think critically' stereotype prevalent in Australia; and that thirdly, no matter how connected you are to 'the world' through the old media of print or the new 'e' media, nothing is a substitute for the real thing – person to person

intellectual and emotional engagement. This third point might seem a bit of a leap, but my experience in the classroom this session made it clear to me that yes, literature enlarges the circumference of the imagination but the classroom community of (foreign) teacher and ten (Japanese) students allowed for the sharing and development of ideas, and the breaking down of stereotypes that would not have otherwise been available. Ninety minutes each week for fourteen weeks with eleven individuals (twelve counting the Teacher's Aid) in a small room is something of a creative hothouse. Here things are thought and said that might not otherwise be thought or said. The opportunity for me to engage with 'the reality' of Japan and 'the Japanese' is something for which I am grateful.

<sup>1</sup> William Blake, 'A Memorable Fancy', *The Marriage of Heaven & Hell*, 1793.

<sup>2</sup> Louis MacNeice, 'Snow', *Poems*, 1935.

<sup>3</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, 1840.

<sup>4</sup> Judith Wright, 'Nigger's Leap, New England', *The Moving Image*, 1946. Wright is speaking in this poem about shared humanity between indigenous ('black') people and invader ('white') people, but it is reference to and belief in a shared humanity generally that I draw on here.

<sup>5</sup> Toshiko Ellis, Chapter 11 of *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Japanese Culture*, ed. Yoshio Sugimoto, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp.199-215.

<sup>6</sup> *Growing up Asian in Australia*, ed. Alice Pung, Collingwood, Vic: Black Inc., 2008.

<sup>7</sup> The poems are 'Alien' by Ouyang Yu (from *Moon Over Melbourne*, 1995) and 'Child and Wattle Tree' by Judith Wright (from *Woman to Man*, 1949).

<sup>8</sup> The phrase is Virginia Woolf's.