

MARK LEE FORD

“We Japanese”

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



“WE JAPANESE”

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

In this narrative *apologia* based on true events, a rising star manager turns to her *senpai*—her senior and mentor—for advice on how to solve an unyielding “foreigner problem” at their office.

His advice to her is resoundingly effective, but it comes with a devastating revelation. In a series of searing and penitent inward confessions, the veteran salaryman confronts the illusions—the religiosity—of the modern Japanese workplace that he was raised in, an institution in which he has become one of its high priests, and she, unknowingly, his acolyte.

MARK LEE FORD is an entrepreneur, scientist, and engineer.

LENNOX SAMUELS is a writer and editor based in Bangkok. He is a former senior editor and foreign correspondent for *Newsweek* and the *Dallas Morning News*, has reported from numerous countries, and covered conflicts in Iraq and Somalia, among others. He was an editor on the multi-part newspaper series “Violence Against Women,” which won the Pulitzer Prize for International Reporting in 1994.

Books by Mark Lee Ford

A Treatise on Leaders

Mandy & Allie

Everyone

Freedom

My Rubric

We Japanese

MARK LEE FORD

“We Japanese”

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

EDITED BY

LENNOX SAMUELS

THE MONEO COMPANY

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

Copyright © 2026 by Mark Lee Ford
All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law. For permission requests, contact the publisher:

The Moneo Company, Box 1343, Uxbridge, Ontario L9P1N5 Canada

THE MONEO COMPANY

www.moneo.jp

Puto. Eligo. Faciam.

Think. Decide. Do.®

ISBN: 978-1-988210-18-6

Printed in the United States of America

“WE JAPANESE”

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

“They’re at it again!” cried Shiori, a rising star manager at the Japanese local headquarters of an American global financial company. Hands on the doorframe, she leaned forward into my office space.

Flummoxed by the high-handedness and bungling of her co-workers from overseas, my *kōhai*’s usual protest sounded this time more like a plea to me for help, one which carried a whiff of futility.

She crossed the threshold and continued, “We Japanese bend over backwards, but they can’t meet us even halfway. Foreigners won’t ever understand the Japanese Way.”

Shiori craves to cleanse herself of her foreign co-workers. For months, she has been stewing in a pot of office battles between foreign and Japanese employees. Arguments about direction and execution have delayed projects. Cost overruns have been accumulating; performance bonuses and promotions are starting to hang in the balance.

When it comes to speaking English in the office, she feels put upon. All of us Japanese do. After all, this is Japan. But she also feels frustrated because she can neither get her point across nor fully understand what is being said around her. Or so she thinks. Just brushing shoulders with English-language situations makes her anxiety flare like hives.

Quitting is not an option for any of us, if not for our ages and financial obligations, then because of the ever-sagging job market.

Perhaps your story resembles hers.

Ten years ago, straight from college, Shiori joined us, a well-regarded Japanese insurance company. I hired her, then raised her to function in an all-Japanese work environment. Fiercely independent and ambitious, she was a royal pain at first. She questioned and challenged everything about our ways of doing things. I doubted she had long left in the Company.

But we found ourselves to be kindred spirits. She eventually took up my lessons well and has been rising fast through the ranks, on track to become the youngest director in the Company's history. Everything was stable and seemingly set in stone.

So when news came last year that one of the world's financial services behemoths—an American insurer headquartered in New York—bid to buy us, she was particularly shocked, as were most of the Japanese employees. Nobody *should* have been surprised. We'd been in the red for years. But getting paid every month regardless of one's value or corporate performance deludes one into thinking *ashita mo aru*—we've always got tomorrow.

Shiori did not know what to think of this development at first. Soon after, under a foreign boss, an expat new to Japan at that, came the radical promise to her of an early promotion, leapfrogging over everybody else. "We need more Japanese women in positions of power," he virtuously and unoriginally proclaimed.

But along with the DEI leg up came the demand that she work in teams integrated with Japanese and foreigners. Par for the course, English is inescapable as the lingua franca.

The changes came too fast even for Shiori. Without so much as a honeymoon period, she began to drown almost immediately.

Any Japanese person who has worked in a foreign company having substantial operations in Japan knows all too well about the changes and attendant problems that foreigners whip up.

Americans in particular try to revolutionize everything overnight without first taking time to understand why things are the way they are. Rules and precedent are their enemies. The American 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 if some of the “lessons” are sound, Americans have a lousy record of leading execution in Japan.

How many times have we seen this? They’ll kick up a dust storm, then run away to America, leaving us holding the bag. We have to clean up their mess, and just in time for the next batch of expats to land on our necks. No matter how one slices the problem, the Americans—never the Japanese—always seem to come out ahead.

“I am loyal and hard-working,” Shiori asserted, as if she had to plead her case to me. “I’d get onboard if they’d come up with a plan that actually worked. Their ideas are bunk.”

I sympathize with Shiori. All of us Japanese feel the same way. Expat bosses saddle us with new and meaningless projects while demanding that we keep up our daily work. We were

hired to execute processes, keep stability, and comply, not to transform the Company. Nothing that I taught her could have ever prepared her for the cultural divide.

“Our workloads are doubling. My pay is the same, and there won’t be any bonuses this year,” Shiori lamented. “They squeeze blood from a stone to line their own pockets, fire people to cut costs, then get fat bonuses afterward. And we are still losing customers!”

Shiori’s barbs about money sting because of the gaping chasm in compensation between the regular Japanese employees and highly paid foreign expats, be they executives or not. Pay inequality is an open wound for all the Japanese employees, one that never heals, and a bitter reminder that it is “us versus them” in the Company...in our homeland. We often talk among ourselves of how the situation would be if the shoe were on the other foot—that is, 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.

A captive audience to Shiori, my mind began to wander. Her rising voice caught the two of us a fleeting glance from a co-worker passing outside the open door to my office. Eying the passerby, I nodded enthusiastically to Shiori’s soliloquy in hopes of bringing our conversation to an end and to spare me the embarrassment of attracting more attention.

In fairness, her comments were accurate albeit emotionally expressed. Righteous anger. But such a well-trodden path begs no reminding. Every Japanese employee, including me, is in the same boat. Grumbling every day without resolution has become almost as demoralizing as enduring the zaniness of the expats.

Shiori began to wrap up, as most of us do, by reciting the litany of the expats’ ostentatious benefits.

“My boss gets ten times my salary. Ten times! Plus the perks: bonuses, a sports car, a palatial condo, family membership at the Tokyo American Club, The American School for his kids. He comes and goes as he pleases. Even the foreign non-executives are on expat deals. They’re pushing us deeper into the red.”

I was about to commiserate with Shiori for the umpteenth time as had become the habit of all Japanese employees with each other. But a memory of life in the Company before the Americans stopped me. Having worked with foreigners in 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.

Shiori’s face telegraphed that she had picked up something from me. Perhaps she sensed that our conversation was going to be more than just another round of quasi-therapeutic commiseration with a comrade-in-arms. Or maybe she worried that I secretly disagreed with everything she had been saying; if so, she would be wrong.

She trusted and respected me as her *senpai*, her mentor. I was fond of her from the outset and proud of the career she had forged as my protégé. Somewhere along the story, who knows when, we both lost the sensible iconoclasm that we once had in common.

Cupping my tea cup with both hands, I leaned forward and peered intently into her eyes over the rims of my eyeglasses. She

knew that the first thing I had taught her was not to raise a problem without at least one solution to go with it. She ducked my stare, allowing a more rational Shiori into the conversation.

“Please. I’m on the mat.”

This was the ring for Shiori’s prizefight. The lines were drawn between the foreign and Japanese employees. And my *kōhai* was getting clobbered.

Yet, I was reluctant to enter that ring to rescue her. I am coasting into retirement. Employees, be they foreign or Japanese, are free to change whatever they want to change in the Company after I retire. I don’t want to add to the inter-generational deadlock, but the Company offers me no upside to change anything. Being all things to all people is keeping me sane and free of conflict. Some of the foreigners use me as a sounding board, even as a confidante, to get the pulse of the Japanese staff.

Above all, doing nothing preserves the monthly cash flow from the Company to my wallet. I have two children in college. My wife has demands.

Not sure myself if I was joking or had finally found the guts to risk my neck to upset the status quo, I reassured Shiori that indeed, yes, she could liberate herself from foreigners. She might even be able to get even. Revenge? Why not. They’ll beg to be transferred, or even sell the Company!

“How so?”

Shiori listened intently as I began to outline my game-plan for her:

1. tell the foreigner incessantly that Japan is unique and that Japanese people require exceptional cultural accommodation for the sake of just us being Japanese;
2. pontificate to the foreigner that business in Japan 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 during meetings with him, then secretly hold an all-Japanese meeting afterward to decide the direction that we will take without him; and
5. marshal all resources to preserve the Japanese status quo in the Company.

And for the coup de grace:

6. wallow in process.

“Aw, come on.” Shiori’s cheeks flushed and ear lobes glowed like Rudolph’s nose, the same as when she has had only a few belts of saké.

“None of this sounds familiar?”

She was chuffed, knowing full well that I caught her red-handed.

“No need to feel embarrassed. But don’t flatter yourself either. You didn’t invent it. All the seniors do it, if not by design then by instinct. I did it at your age in my first company, a *gaishikei*¹.”

Shiori looked relieved as if I just gave her misconduct my imprimatur.

“Ever wonder why it works so well?”

¹ A foreign capital company operating in Japan

“Like I said, they don’t—no, can’t—speak Japanese. They can never understand us as a people.”

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 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 also has a boss, and he knows that his promotion to becoming a regional big shot or even a global director is in the cards after his assignment in Japan ends.

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

“So we’re lying,” interjected Shiori defensively.

“Not to them,” I retorted.

Teetering on blowing the cover I had carefully woven for 35 years, I bit my tongue to halt any trace of a confession. I was like a priest struggling not to scream out the atheism that he kept secret from his flock.

“I am only following the Japanese Way,” she said in the same way a Christian apologist explains away Holy Communion as being only symbolic when asked if it represents a cannibalistic act.

**Lie, the first:
“The Japanese Way”**

I don’t have the guts to confess to you, Shiori, that I taught you the wrong things too well. A miscalculation. A botch of the first order. Call it what you want.

You were supposed to be immune to the virus of the mind. One of the select few closeted atheists who would one day “serve” as a priest, like me. You were supposed to master our ideologies to run the system one day, not become a brownshirt to enforce them. I created you dangerously imperfect, and am now losing control of you.

You saw through the con from the get go. That is why you were such a pain to the senior staff when I hired you. All but you in your *dōki*² accepted the ideology without question. You had the audacity to challenge what others blindly espouse.

² A cohort of employees who join a company at the same time, typically after graduation from college.

But with unwavering perseverance, I bent your mind unintentionally. I ended-up gutting your rationality while leaving your zeal intact. I turned you into a true believer, like those in your cohort, and now it is too late to tell you what I truly believe. Keeping you in the dark is the only thing preventing you from usurping me.

If I could, I would tell you that 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, the ones with whom your generation is now besotted.

Yet, we 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, to use against our countrymen by manipulating them.

Our culture gave you the cudgel, and I showed you by example how to swing it mercilessly against your peers, then your seniors, to stand on their necks to climb the corporate ladder, as I had done before you. And they willingly stuck out their heads with cultish dutifulness for you to beat with that cudgel, all in the name of the Japanese Way.

All the while, I expanded my fiefdom with you as one of my swords in the Company. I love you like a daughter, Shiori, but this is business, after all. More than business. It is a way that is bigger than your limited understanding of what you and most of the employees call the Japanese Way, one that I had believed unequivocally that you would control someday, and from which

now you are forever barred. You think that you are my only sword?

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 is constituted of peoples of diverse cultures, foreign and domestic, who have been busily integrating, hybridizing, assimilating, balkanizing, warring, 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 ideologues among our countrymen for selfish gain³.

“Shall we freshen up?”, Shiori offered, gesturing with an up-faced palm at my tepid tea.

I swirled the cup to catch some Golden Hour sunlight behind my shoulder on the remaining turbid, moss-green liquor. It had started to oxidize and was becoming bitter.

“Un.”⁴

Seated and head down, scanning across haphazardly collated papers on my desk, I presented the cup commandingly, left arm fully outstretched. Unable and unwilling to meet my eyes in the moment, she bowed the minimum amount required and, cupping her hands, took my cup, pivoted, then went to a hot water dispenser near the other window of my corner office to steep a fresh pot.

“You have a mountain of requisitions for your approval,” smalltalk she offered with her back to me as she pushed the plunger on the dispenser looking out the side window.

“Approval? *Approval!*”, I thought derisively. As I heard the rising pitch of gurgling hot water filling the tea pot, I felt a momentary twinge of disdain for her.

I removed the cap of my bamboo *hanko*⁵, eyed the artistically engraved glyph on its base with some nostalgic fascination, then the pile of forms on my desk with resignation.

³ See “Epilogue.”

⁴ Yes

⁵ A seal that is used to sign official documents

My so-called approval would be either the last or second-last on these forms, each one having at least five other seals from subordinates before having reached my desk. Being my subordinate, Shiori’s seal would already be on some of the requisitions.

“Aghh.” I caught myself aimlessly rolling the cylindrical hanko between my fingers too late.

Shiori drew a tissue and passed it to me while placing the cup of fresh tea on my desk, away from my immediate workspace. I tried to wipe away smudges of old red ink that my fingers had rubbed from the hanko, then flipped open the lid on the ink pad, fresh for today’s batch of “approvals.”

Lie, the second:

“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 confuse “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 act out a phony show of impartiality and due diligence. We undertake endless discussions and analyses about the direction of a project, wringing our hands over minutiae, which only protracts the time and cost of the direction multifold.

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.

“About foreigners not understanding us,” I continued while affixing my seal to the requisition forms.

“Yes?”

“...how much, do you think, has to do with language?”

“I daresay all of it. They don’t understand Japanese. But even if they were fluent, how could anyone expect people coming from a country only a few hundred years old to understand us.”

I butted in, “We have the oldest continuous dynastic monarchy in the world.”

“Exactly,” she said resolutely, plunking herself down in a chair beside my desk.

I had served Shiori a perfect, self-contained explanation on a silver platter. An argument from authority, bereft of logic. No further explanation was necessary in Shiori’s mind nor mine. We were standing on opposite ends of the planet with different interpretations of the same explanation.

Lie, the third:

“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 and proudly severed ourselves from the free flow of ideas of the world, 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 tongue-tied political leaders are sidelined at global summits. We bury our heads in repetitious processes for our entire careers, not even talking to other departments in our own companies in our own language, let alone with people around the world in English.

Yet, we have the 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 we collaborate with the rest of the world 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.⁶

I finished sealing the last of the requisition forms and placed it face down on top of the ‘finished’ pile.

⁶ 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.

“Global financial centers?” Shiori’s quick eye glanced a copy of this years rankings that had been hidden under the last requisition.

“New York, London, and Hong Kong tied for first. Singapore, San Francisco, Shanghai all made the top ten.”

“Tokyo?”

“Tenth,” I replied.

Shiori was non-plussed.

“Six years ago, we were in the top three,” I gently pressed.

“Prime Minister Takeichi is changing that.”

“Really?”

“You know, ‘Make Japan strong. Make Japan prosperous.’ It’s inspiring. Something that my generation is really getting behind. And it took a woman to do it, too! Not some old fogey. We’ll be back on top in no time,” she said rather pompously and immaturely.

Make Japan prosperous. Thirty-five stimuli packages in as many years to the tune of 950 trillion yen⁷. Yes, Shiori, we are so prosperous that you cannot afford to have a baby. And Takeichi is borrowing and spending for stimulus package #36. How original.

One word perfectly describes us, all our strengths and all our weaknesses: predictable. Japanese stubbornness shares first prize with Japanese cowardice...my cowardice. All along, someone has been and is prospering. And someone will prosper because of Takeichi and her handlers. But it’s *not* going to be you.

⁷ USD 6.1 trillion, inflation adjusted for June 2026.

**Lie, the fourth:
“Harmony”**

Of all the ideologies, *wa*⁸ 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.

⁸ 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.

Just as we confuse laboring in consensus with making consensus-based decisions, we confuse harmony with order.

Shiori, open your mind to what you are seeing all around you! 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. Half of the desks on this floor alone have antidepressants tucked away in the back of a drawer.

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.

“Changing topics for a minute. HR is asking for nominees for a training on innovation and global leadership. I want to propose you as a candidate. Rising star global leaders. I heard great things about it from last year’s group.”

“Innovation. Sure, why not. I’d like to learn about it. But any new idea by the junior staff is always rejected by the seniors. No offense.”

“No, no. I get it. But it might count favorably toward your next promotion.”

“When do you need to know?”

Shiori, you *can* see objective reality...when you chose to. You know the status quo. The inter-generational deadlock. And you have never been one to suffer fools. I know you too well. You’ll attend the course and give everyone a run for their money. You’re a shrewd one. Calculating. You’ve one leg in the world of your *dōki* and one leg in mine.

I wonder if I can still pull you into mine before it's too late for you, the Company...our country.

Everything that powered our ascent after the war—innovation, entrepreneurship, sensible iconoclasm—has vanished. Japan is at the very bottom of the global rankings on entrepreneurship and innovation, a sole fish content to wallow on the sea floor, flat as a pancake with two googly eyes gazing at all the interesting goings on above our head.

Our market is shrinking because your generation has no babies. Gen Z has no dreams, no natural curiosity, and the attention span of a gnat. Most of all, Zoomers are gutless. Every two minutes, twenty- and thirty-somethings need to knock on the doors of seniors to ask what to do and permission to do it.

That's how we raised your generation while mine fed at the trough. Everyone my age wants to wring as much as possible from the system on our way out the door to retirement. We have milked the cow dry and left you nothing, Shiori.

And both of our generations rely on legacy processes and technology from the 1970s and 1980s. No bright ideas of the kind required will ever emerge as long as our generations remain locked at the horns.

The bureaucratic mindset has escaped its masters' control to commandeer almost every cell in the body, metastasizing to every corner of society—a massive tumor of ever-increasing aggressiveness. No one alive comprehends its length, breadth, or depth. We have only a piecemeal understanding of its myriad, autonomous workings. The malignancy presses down on the pillars of our prosperity, oozing over and around them, nourishing itself by sapping the vitality of our remaining self-

reliance, resilience, and natural curiosity. Value is consumed by the cancer faster than we can create it.

Shiori, like fire-starter gel, you are an accelerant to the malignancy.

Your precious Prime Minister has expelled and barred the only people who have the resilience, brains, and courage to innovate on your behalf—foreigners. Like little children, you believe her tale that there is a Chinese bogeyman hiding behind the curtain or under your bed waiting to slit your throat.

How long will it be before the Americans cut their losses and sell the Company? Be careful what you ask for, Shiori-san. You have no say as to who will be the next buyer.

**Lie, the fifth:
“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.

“Going back to what you said earlier. The Prime Minister’s strategy...”

“Make Japan strong,” she interjected.

“Yes, yes. Make Japan strong. America has about 50,000 military personnel here...”

She broke in again. I found her increasingly rude since the election sweep of Takaichi. “It’s high time that we stand on our own two feet. We value our partnership with America, but we’ve got to be independent.”

“Independent? We have our own constitution and...”

“That’s the first thing that’s gotta go. Article 9. The world has enjoyed our money for years. We need to be respected. China for example.”

Yes, Shiori. Let’s talk about China, for example.

Our post-WWII rehabilitation and prosperity could have been the model throughout Asia, the Middle East, the world. But nobody took it up. Taking lessons from a people who did not have an iota of moral authority was repugnant to them. This is why, in no small reason, We Japanese gave rise to two despotic communist states as neighbors. Do you think they simply popped-in out of thin air? And this is also why there is an ‘Article 9’, to protect others from us as much as it is to protect us from ourselves.

Seeing how your Gen Z has allied with the eldest of the Boomers in support of Takaichi tells me that Article 9 has never been more needed.

**Lie, the sixth:
“Obeying the rules = Justice”**

Even after the bitter lessons from WWII, the individual freedoms afforded through a new constitution, and the ascent of Japan as a global economic superpower, Japanese people are mired in a society that, in large measure, still runs on honor and shame. And for this reason, though awash in comfort and prosperity, most of us suffer by how honor and shame plays out in our daily lives while the elite do as they please with reckless abandon, paying no price for the harm they do to their countrymen, in the way of their feudal ancestors.

Societies that operate on the premise of fairness and justice (or at least, those that aspire to) try to apply the rule of law equally to all citizens, and with objective accountability. All rights remain with the individual other than those voluntarily relinquished to the state through the mechanism of a political process. This is the basis of social contracts, that is, constitutions and governments that are restricted; legitimate political authority arises from an agreement among individuals to surrender some freedoms to a governing body in exchange for the protection of their remaining rights and social order.

The United States is one such society whose citizens try to operate on this premise and, at least on paper, so is Japan. But the similarity ends with their constitutions.

Societies that operate on the basis of honor and shame emphasize social standing, collective reputation, and loyalty. Equal treatment under the law and objective accountability are not durable in such societies because they are constantly

undermined. And all rights are assumed to remain with the state, or those who are in power, usually tribal in nature. Because fairness and justice are doled out based on emotions, honor and shame being among the strongest, there is no objectivity or continuity; unfairness and injustice flourish. One must always ask permission to do something rather than assume he or she has the innate rights and agency to act autonomously as an individual, without the permission of anyone.

Japan is such a society. Corporate cultures are rife with it, and the largest companies are fiefdoms within a larger, dystopian feudal landscape.

Fairness, equal treatment under the law, and justice *do* exist in Japan, just enough to give the impression of fairness and justice, but they are fragile and easily compromised. This is not to say that the United States is much better. The difference is that Americans understand when it is happening, why it hurts them, and what to do about it. Japanese, for the most part, are not only oblivious to their situation, they are willing participants in their own ruination and perpetuation of the problem.

It is trivial to prove this so. Ask any salaryman, any office lady, any employee—ask yourself: “Given a choice between obeying an order from your CEO that will harm someone seriously, or disobeying the order, which would you choose?” The fear of punishment and failure is so ingrained that most people turn a blind eye to the damage done around them—to themselves—every day. This is the norm in Japanese companies and throughout Japanese society.

The Minamata Disease travesty and Fukushima Nuclear catastrophe are the grossest examples, albeit not the only ones, if at least not in scale, then in spirit and practice; there are many others.

In the case of the mercury poisoning of Minamata Bay, about the killing and nightmarishly grotesque maiming of thousands of innocent Japanese citizens—mostly babies and children—for generations, Chisso Corporation, The Ministry of International Trade and Industry, The Ministry of Health and Welfare, and the Kumamoto Prefectural government are the poster children for what happens when communities, organizations, and societies operate on honor and shame. Chisso's more fanatic employees did the leg work, eagerly serving the coverup, intimidation, bullying, assault, beating, humiliation, denigration, and shunning of the victims and their families. The problems of mercury poisoning first appeared in the 1920s and, to this day, there has never been a full and honest reckoning and objective accountability.

Yet, honor was and continues to be preserved for those who control Chisso and the ministries—the top of the status quo; face-saving is simply a proxy for defending their authority and money. They are neither empathetic to the victims nor sorry for their sins, only sorry that they were careless enough to be exposed. As with the numberless innocents of the untouchable and “backward” castes (as the upper echelon calls them) in India, victims in general in Japan do not enjoy the immunity of the perpetrators; the victims' function—their designed purpose—in this system is *to be* dishonored and shamed because the status quo will collapse without them.

Olympus. Toshiba. Kobe Steel. Takata Corporation. Nissan. Mitsubishi. Morinaga Milk. Tokio Marine. Nomura. The list goes on. The problem is endemic because the operating system of honor and shame is endemic. The government bureaucrats and politicians always get a free pass. It is faster to list-up the organizations that have kept their noses clean.

The mindset is ubiquitous in Japanese businesses, government agencies, and elected offices, which is why cronyism or “crony capitalism” flourishes here. In such societies, those who fail or are victims are loathed more than the act of failure itself. Their failure and victimization reinforce the solidarity of those in power. There are no second chances for those who fail or are victims.

In societies and companies operating on honor and shame, obeying the rules equates neither to justice nor fairness. And since “doing the right thing” in the long term is good for business, tribulation is inevitable for a company that runs on honor and shame.

What’s next 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 the 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. Can you break free, Shiori? Can you 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.

“Do you hate your country or something?” she suddenly blurted with obligatory patriotic disdain.

I was careless. My glancing remark about the constitution was enough to tip off the brownshirt in her. Maybe she somehow could read in my face or body language about what I had been thinking during our entire conversation.

I halfheartedly shrugged my shoulders and pushed out a bit of a conciliatory wince, knowing that once she spread the word about my heresy against the religion of the Japanese Way, my

Japanese colleagues will label me an eccentric at best, a traitor at worst, but maybe a folk hero to some.

She replied by cocking her head slightly while leaning back with a sigh, arms folded. I let the awkwardness of a long pause marinate both of us.

“I guess...well, I suppose. Maybe I get what you are trying to tell me from your game-plan,” Shiori conceded with a smirk. “OK, more than a bit.” She expressed a glint of affection that told me our relationship was still intact, for the time being.

My emotions started to cloud my objectivity. Her cohort, like most of the employees, are pawns in our system, but she was special to me. Could I pull her back from the abyss into which I had inadvertently been pushing her for years? Even more for my sake than hers, preserving the status quo of my power is paramount. It would take time, more than what I had left in the Company.

Perhaps sensing that she might lose her Japanese club card and be branded a heretic with me, she quickly doubled back, but without teeth. Still, it was another jolting reminder of how precarious my situation could quickly become if the inmates take over the asylum.

“But you only criticize things that we do wrong. It’s all one-sided. What about all things that the Americans, Brits, Indians and all the rest are doing?”

Speaking my mind would feel liberating, if only for short term gratification; I was bound to pay a political price in the Company for releasing years of pent up frustration, having toed the party line and been a willing lackey to the inane religiosity of the mob for decades. The tool that my generation—my elite

upper echelon—had created, which worked brilliantly in our favor for decades, was now at risk of bringing the whole ship down.

I squirmed knowing that I owe my kōhai the truth; my catharsis aside, it was a worthy price for me to pay to help at least one person from the younger generation avoid what mine has gone through...what theirs is going through. I might be blackballed and lose my power and social standing, but my pension would be intact. And maybe this could be the first small step toward breaking the inter-generational deadlock that cripples the Company, as it does the country.

“Of course, they dump loads of their own hangups on us. Shiori-san, at the same time, how can I—you and me, any of us—change foreigners? They are beyond reach. But we can start with ourselves. At least we can come clean with ourselves.”

“Well...”

Her eyes dodged mine in a way that let on that she understood far more than she dared to admit openly, at least for now. Most of us know the con game that is played on us, and that we play on ourselves, especially someone as sharp as Shiori, but are too scared and ashamed to call it out. At some point, what child doesn't struggle to admit that Santa isn't real?

As Shiori's mind started to open a little, I couldn't help but feel futility at being able to put a dent in anything in the office. Maybe this sense of futility is why we end up grinning and bearing “We Japanese” during our entire careers, irrespective of whether foreigners are part of the story. The status quo is too heavy to cast off, and our self-confidence and moral courage are

the first things that it strips from us in our youth to protect itself.

Either be a cog in the machine or control the machine, but know that the machine is indestructible and eternal. I chose the latter, and with it came power, prestige, and money. As Milton’s Satan said after being cast into the pit: “Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav’n.”

But maybe there is another way of looking at it. Every few generations, our stubbornness, our irrational escalation to a committed course of action, crashes the entire country. World War II. The Meiji Restoration. And in the aftermath of the destruction and sorrow, we re-discover not We Japanese, but We Mankind. Me, the Individual. And we rise to inexorable heights. But the ideology of We Japanese is not eradicated. It lingers like a dormant virus in each cell, in each Japanese person, only to flare up again. The cycle repeats.

So maybe Takeichi, or the next version of her, is doing exactly what has been prescribed by her handlers in the cycle, as are we and everybody else.

A few months later, Shiori got an opportunity to put her new awareness to use. The American parent decided to cut its losses and jettison the Company, selling it to a large Asian financial group. Shortly afterward, Shiori’s marketing team 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?”

Our electric conversation of a few months ago ended up bringing Shiori and me closer. Neither of us complained less,

Mark Lee Ford

but we had become more candid with each other and, perhaps, tended to bow more often to the absurdities around us with a sense of humor.

Taking one, I chuckled to myself, thinking of the one card in business that trumps We Japanese, We Americans, and yes, We Chinese too: “He who has the pesos, has the say-so’s.”

Epilogue

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.

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.

Mark Lee Ford

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

* * *

