

Fitting In

We were invited to a party recently – not really my cup of tea, but a popular formula found throughout the length and depth of Japan where people gather together to celebrate some occasion, be it cherry blossom viewing or sending a colleague off up to Tokyo or conversely down to some provincial backwater. No hope of a normal conversation above the din of *karaoke* or even when a lull in the noise permits, nothing much to be said as most participants are over the top on a lethal mixture of beer/sake/whiskey. The reason why this party set it apart from the hundreds of others now blurred into oblivion, was that it took place in this hamlet, in a neighbour's house. No big deal you may think, but our inclusion in the party was somewhat unusual....

Foreigners are forever bemoaning the fact that they don't get invited to peoples' houses or when they are, the invitation is laden with undertones of motivation. They family may have been abroad or have some member going abroad soon. They may suddenly have decided to get internationalised or brush up their English and a foreigner in their midst does wonders as an international decoration. Foreigners themselves are partly to blame for this state of affairs; since they don't take the trouble to learn Japanese or are reluctant to speak it, which effectively bars them from communicating with ninety-nine percent of the inhabitants of this country. At parties they tend to cling to other *gaijin* in the room with a sense of relief. But by and large Japanese don't invite foreigners to their parties not because they are 'foreigners' but because they are outsiders. If you live in the countryside you feel even more strongly left out as rural societies are very clannish.

For 15 years we lived in a village over the mountain called Jio. In the beginning I went out of my way to follow local custom; bowing and greeting all and sundry, giving lifts to people who'd missed the bus, attending funerals of people I barely knew, doing my foreign bit by teaching English to their kids. People were superficially friendly but I guessed they gossiped behind my back – well, rural societies are the same the world over – but I never got invited to a party or asked to join in any village activity. There were a few ominous rumblings as my menagerie grew, especially from immediate neighbours, but it wasn't until I wanted to rent an orchard for chickens and other livestock that a state of war was declared. I had, or so I thought, gone through the right procedure (months of negotiation and a fortune spent on boxes of cakes) in the accepted fashion. The go-ahead was given and just after I had moved in, set up fences and so on, they (the neighbours) said "No." They had waited and watched never voicing opposition for months and at the moment guaranteed to cause maximum loss of face, they acted. I was furious and humiliated. All right, I thought, the kid gloves are off. From that day forth I pointedly ignored everyone and decided to judge people on my terms not theirs. Marvellous feeling of relief like changing into a sweater and jeans after being shackled in a suit. The result was astounding – suddenly I had friends overnight. The masks were off and people who'd been holding back all those years jumped off the fence and came forward. Enemies no longer had to tire their face muscles trying to smile, they could scowl freely. But by that stage I had decided to look for somewhere where contact with neighbours would be minimal. It took nearly five more years but those years were a great deal more relaxed than the first ten had been.

Noma Ohara where we live now is a stone's throw, well nearly, from Jio, a mere couple of kilometres or 20 minutes walk away. But the atmosphere is totally different. People are friendly but much franker, voicing their criticism if they don't like something. It's much easier to live

in a frank society. You'd think an isolated mountain hamlet with only 30 households (compared with Jio's 200) would be more withdrawn, more difficult to penetrate – but initially at least, this doesn't seem to be so. Maybe because the place is small, people feel a stronger need to live together in greater harmony. It also seems to have a higher proportion of eccentrics than usual so maybe this helps too. Time will not doubt tell but the problem at the moment is not hoping to make friends but discouraging over-friendly ones from dropping in every evening to consume time and alcohol.

With land prices going up the way they are, more and more foreigners, like Japanese, are being pushed out onto rural fringes. Some people opt for a taste of country life anyway. Here are a few guidelines, based on very vivid experience, for those contemplating a move.

Be yourself. Don't try to make yourself into something you're not in order to get accepted. Gaijin all too often suffer from a rejection syndrome when they try too hard to go the whole hog in becoming Japanese only to find in the end they're no nearer to being one of the locals than a gaijin who's just stepped off the plane. Be polite but firm with locals and they'll respect you for it. Weakness is something they seize upon and take advantage of. Be prepared for lots of personal questions, especially about money. Peasants are obsessively money-minded, regarding foreigners as multi-millionaires while they remain impoverished eking out a living from their rice-filled acres. Although irritating at first, one learns to expect the question before it's asked and to field suitably vague answers.

Gardening is an international language so try growing vegetables. This is a ready passport to making friends. Locals open up a lot if you till a bit of land, they regard you as one of their own kind.

If you think that Japanese rural society is impenetrable, you should try living in England's West Country. 'Newcomers' even after 30 years are still referred to by locals as "*zem furernerz*."

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