

Twenty Years of Asian Division Memories

John James

August 2020

Hello everyone. John James here coming to you from beautiful Eugene, Oregon (Go Ducks!!)

I spent twenty years in the overseas program, not counting continued DE teaching after I left, all of it in Asia, most of it in Okinawa. In August 1982 I flew to Tokyo from Seattle with the other new folks to receive several days of orientation at Yokota Air Force Base, including a nice overnight in Tokyo where, at the Hilton Hotel, I had the second-best scrambled eggs I ever ate. My first assignment that first year was at Misawa Air Base in far northern Honshu. During the term break I drove to Aomori and took the ferry across the Tsugaru Strait to Hakodate in Hokkaido. I didn't know it then because I didn't know much then (that would change), but Hakodate has a history. It was one of the two ports 'opened' to foreign shipping in the 1854 Commodore Perry treaty of friendship and amity with Tokugawa Japan. I was the only *gaijin* aboard the ferry, the passenger cabin was full, and as I sat there gazing at a sea of black-haired heads it began to sink it – I was in Japan! Then as I later walked around the town – it was actually Christmas eve – I gained some more insight. At the stroke of midnight, an army of workers materialized and took down all the Christmas decorations on the stores. See, the Japanese are somewhat literal-minded. The decorations were for Christmas. Christmas was now over. Done.

So, I taught my first two terms ever at Misawa in far northeast Honshu, then the next two at Iwakuni Marine Corps Air Station in far southwest Honshu, then a summer term

in Korea. Typical overseas Maryland deal. Next, I went to Okinawa for term one 1983 and stayed there until 2002. Not a typical overseas Maryland deal. My regular course offerings were the American history survey and the macro-micro economics sequence, with a foray now and then into money and banking and American business history. I was the Okinawa/Hong Kong area director for several years around 1990 (the program survived). After I resigned and went back to teaching, I pretty soon began to teach DE courses with good ol' Web Tycho. I wasn't quite a DE pioneer, but a pretty early, shall we say, convert.

Now, there is a saying - Wherever you go, there you are. I endeavored to 'be' in Okinawa Japan. I was ever so strongly encouraged to do that by marriage to my lovely wife Ayako (a Maryland Japanese language instructor) and then by the birth of our wonderful son Motoi. We lived off base, of course. We bought a house! A simple cinder block structure high on a hill with a sweeping view of the Japan Sea and a nice lawn to sit in and swat mosquitoes while watching the sun set. I reached out to engage with the world outside the base bubble. I gave a few talks at the monthly luncheons of the American Chamber of Commerce in Okinawa. I consulted (briefly) with the American consul general in Okinawa on a matter or two of interest. Our son grew up Japanese, which was natural; we were 'in' Japan. He played with the local kids, went to local schools, a normal kid experience, and, of course, grew up speaking the language. I studied Japanese (so I could talk to him!) and acquired sufficient reading ability to develop a sideline as a free-lance translator. That was more like a hobby than a money-making enterprise, or at least that's how some of my clients seemed to consider it, but a whole lot of fun and satisfaction. Japanese, as you know, is written in *kanji*, Chinese ideograms and there is no way around it, you have to learn a bunch of them if you want to read Japanese.

However, my most substantial and satisfying 'there' relationship was my association with my friend Terunobu Tamamori, head of the Bank of the Ryukyus International Foundation (Internationalism was all the rage in Japan then.). I collaborated with Tamamori-san on a variety of projects – lectures seminars, study tours, for the better part of ten years, until the Japanese economy went into what looked like a permanent swoon, interest rates on government bonds went to zero, and the foundation lost its funding. Our most substantial undertaking was the publication of several dual-language handbooks packed with information on Okinawa and Okinawan life, aimed at Okinawan and mainland Japan readers, of course, but also with the hope of acquainting the wider world with the islands and island life. I did the English translations for those. Lots of fun. Also somewhat remunerative. I would have done it for nothing, but Japanese always pay. Not to pay is to lose face, to leave a relationship owing something to the other party. Paying eliminates that.

In due course, it was time to move on. Our son had reached his mid-teens, his command of Japanese was assured, the time had come for him to “go English,” go to school in English in an English-speaking world, and we moved to Oregon. He handled the change superbly (he’s a crack tennis player and that was his *entre*. He didn’t have to talk, just hit) and is now, as an adult, native-speaker fluent in both languages, a doctoral candidate at Temple University and very happily married to a lovely Ukrainian girl, also a graduate student. Yeah, what a kid! He’s been awarded a Fulbright Fellowship; if it weren’t for the damn (darn!) pandemic he’d be in Japan now doing research. As for his ma and pa, I’m working on an interminable book manuscript. Ayako, who has always had fluent English, is diligently studying Spanish, because it’s there, playing tennis, growing flowers and vegetables in the backyard. We’re wearing our masks and keeping our distance. The eighteen years here have sped by.

My twenty years in the overseas program were some of the happiest and most satisfying of my life, the most fulfilling personally and professionally no doubt, presenting opportunities I never would have enjoyed otherwise, indeed probably would not even have been aware of. I never fail to feel grateful for the opportunity. I met many people and made many good friends along the way, far too many of whom have passed on over the years. Time takes its toll, ineluctably, but memories endure.