

Rebound?

Recently I celebrated the completion of my first full year of Cantonese studies. It was a small celebration amounting to only a brief remark to the pleasant Hong Kong lady, who sweeps away the fallen leaves, cigarette butts, and scraps of discarded paper that gather at the foot of the large cement table where I study every morning. Just how many people truly appreciate my presence at the table is difficult to say. Some have indicated that I should move inside or simply find another place. Very few people ever make an effort to talk with me. There are those who smile as they pass and even say good morning on occasion. Unfortunately I can never tell whether they are smiling in friendship or in mockery at my endeavor. No matter, for soon I will be able to read and write Cantonese just as well as most Hong Kong residents can read and write English. Who knows? Someday I might even learn to sustain a conversation, but this is likely to be more difficult, as I must first overcome the negative feeling that invariably overcomes me, when native Hong Kong residents respond to my fledgling Cantonese with their stilted, often incorrect English. Have I been too harsh? Is the pleasant Hong Kong lady not an exception?

This special day also marked the completion of my second year of Hong Kong residency.

Just previous to my coming to Hong Kong I had spent nine years in Japan's decade long, stagnating economy with very little to show for my effort in terms of professional advancement. This despite the fact that I had learned to read and write, and even hold lectures in Japanese. I had grown accustomed to the ins-and-outs of Japanese society and was very familiar with the political, economic, and legal systems. I had also become fond of Japanese sushi, soba, and hot springs. Still, one's professional career is important, and I had come to Hong Kong with the hope of finally advancing my own.

Of course, it was difficult for me to know what to expect from my new East Asian host. For example, there was no plan for someone to pick me up at the airport, when I arrived. Also, I would have to find my own lodging upon my arrival and would not be reimbursed for my plane flight and moving costs. In Japan all of these things would have been provided by my host. Notwithstanding, every society is different, and one must be wary about drawing quick comparisons between cultures with which one is only vaguely familiar. Besides, I had never been to Hong Kong and had heard many good things about it from my Japanese friends.

With everything taken into account I was thus able to overlook the hundreds of ants with whom I shared a room in the university's guest house during my first two weeks of residence. In the end they never got into bed with me and seemed pre-occupied with travelling from one unknown point to another along a path that never intersected with my own. The seemingly reputable Hong Kong shoe shop that twice sold me a pair of junk sandals was not so easily forgiven, though.

Should I have been particularly disturbed by the sudden appearance of family-

sex-, and graft-related posters that began appearing around my office door shortly after my arrival? Should I have raised an eyebrow, when my teaching assistant turned out to be a Chinese mainlander who barely spoke English and knew almost no Cantonese? Would it have been too much for someone to assign me a Hong Kong graduate student already well acquainted with the Hong Kong educational system? Surely a gesture of this sort would have been well received by someone who had 80% of his annual workload squeezed into the first four months of his employment. What about when I discovered that the graduate class to which I had been assigned was a departmental sore point and I had just been tossed a political hot potato? Alas, all of these shortcomings only paled when I discovered that I had once again been hired as a native English speaking economics instructor to provide students with the illusion that my new department and university really cared about their educational development and English writing ability. Well, I will not bother you here with the details about how one can be used by one's employer in ways that one finds morally and ethically repugnant.

It was on July 31, 2001 that I loaded my last box of books into a pick-up truck and said good-bye to my new employer. Several weeks before I received a letter of dismissal from the university's personnel office. In the letter, disguised as a thank-you note, I found an expression of gratitude for my having faithfully fulfilled my contractual commitments. Unfortunately, I was just as unable then, as I am now, to return the gesture. In 15 days my work visa with the Hong Kong government would expire, and I had not yet secured a new place of employment. As I had only one year's worth of saving in my Hong Kong bank account, I felt very much like a displaced refugee with no boat and no country. Was I to hop on a plane back to Tokyo and watch another decade of my life disappear in ignominy? Was I to return to my native homeland where I was more likely to be castigated than congratulated for having endured an entire decade in East Asia with only a brief two-week reprieve? What employer in the West would have even cared about my East Asian experience, anyway? One only pays for experience that is marketable, and life stories must be put into print before they can amount to anyone's income.

So, all things considered I returned to the Immigration Department in Wan Chai and humbly asked for an extension of my work visa. Though I did manage to obtain a three-month grace period, it was hardly enough for me to find full-time work. There are reasons for this that are beyond anyone's control; my resumé is a statistical outlier and does not easily find its way to the top of any employer's application stack. Also, I knew few people beyond the narrow confines of my former employer's campus, as I had devoted my complete energy for the past year into making my new Hong Kong employment a sustainable long term relationship.

By October 31, when my extension expired, it was clear that the soonest I could find new employment would be in the spring of the following year. Indeed, as my credentials are primarily academic it would be difficult finding employment midway through a school term anywhere in the world. Three months of my meager savings were already gone. Did anyone besides a certain lady care that I was studying Cantonese? Dutifully I returned to the Immigration Office and requested a further extension of my work visa. As extensions are not granted for the purpose of finding new employment, I

had to come up with a good excuse for obtaining one.

Though I am not a vindictive person at heart, I am a well-trained scientist who is always in search of cause and effect. As I knew well the cause of my plight and could easily imagine and even knew others that had faced a similar predicament, I decided to sue my former employer. What better way to achieve the goal that I had just spent the past previous year unable to achieve -- improve the Hong Kong system of education! The idea was both simple and noble. By accusing my former employer of breach of contract, I would cast my current status as a non-employee of the university into doubt. As such, the Immigration Department would have ample reason to grant me a further extension of my old work visa until the matter of my contract extension could be formally settled in a court of law. In this way I could at least obtain part-time employment until I found something more in keeping with standard Hong Kong immigration policy.

By mid-November the Immigration Department had still not taken action, and I could not afford to wait. My savings knew only one direction -- downward; and with my visa in limbo, part-time employment was no longer a legal alternative. So, I did what I could and wrote a formal discussion paper about Hong Kong education and the underlying structural problems that led to my demise with my former employer. In addition, I continued with my outdoor Cantonese studies and, yes of course, sent out more employment applications.

By mid-December I had already delivered my paper before the Hong Kong Institute of Education and sat for my first Hong Kong job interview, but still no word from the Immigration Office.... Then it came, like a door slammed shut by an unexpected wind. "No!". No employment visa, no part-time work opportunity. In a moment my official status had changed from that of dedicated foreign resident with a serious grievance to that of a passing tourist with a lingering complaint!

Had I caused the Immigration Office some injury? Was I foolish to have believed that the Hong Kong government would support me in my legal proceedings against a state-run institution? Had someone forgotten to mention that much of Hong Kong's pride is based on its international reputation, and I was a foreigner who had just been abused by a privately incorporated government university? Do the children of Hong Kong's Immigration Department not attend Hong Kong public schools? Had I not explained well enough our mutually beneficial need for my prosecution against my former employer?

Putting the university, Hong Kong education, and me aside for the moment, how is anyone to obtain a fair trial in a Hong Kong court of law, if they are denied the means to sustain themselves financially during their prosecution? It is illegal to work part-time in Hong Kong with only a visitor's pass! As another two months of my savings had already disappeared, and results from my fall applications, which had just begun to trickle in, were generally negative, I rejected the Immigration Department's decision in good conscience. Several weeks later I was told to leave the Region. Had someone not made a mistake?

So, I wrote a letter of complaint to the Director of the Hong Kong Immigration

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Department, and had it delivered by my own Consulate General's office. In this way I could be relatively sure that the director would see it. In the end I was allowed to remain, but still, no work-visa....

Already January had passed, half of my saving were gone, and I was scheduled to present my case to the Hong Kong Labor Tribunal on February 20. My real struggle had just begun. On July 5 I received written notice from the Hong Kong Court of First Instance that my case had been dismissed for a second time. The explanation was little different from that of the Labor Tribunal's: ignore the evidence, put your faith in the words of Hong Kong administrators, and reaffirm the system. No change in Hong Kong is needed, especially that promoted by an outsider.

Perhaps I should never have left Japan....

Several days later I submitted a proposal to the Immigration Office for a new research and translation company that I had prepared for this outcome, and on August 28 I received permission to remain in Hong Kong in order to start my business. Was it because the Immigration Office felt that I had a good chance to succeed? Or, was it because they were looking for a Hong Kong sponsor to pay for my eventual departure? In any case, where before I had no savings I am now in debt and looking for clients.

What is likely to be the theme of my company's first project? English language instruction in Hong Kong. Some rebounds are a little tougher than others.

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