This basic military training and lessons in discipline would later be harnessed by Islamic teachers. Davis wrote that the “boys did not need to be motivated to fight for their people. The misery of life in the camps, the visibility of their parents’ suffering, and the presence of Israeli troops in their village do a good job of it. . . . Most Palestinian youths have heard their mothers cry over lost homes and have watched Israeli troops carting off their fathers and brothers to jail.”

One of the best-known organizers, al Makkah, proved talkative to Editor Davis. He said that when he “decides it is time for a young man to go on a martyrdom mission, he decides where the young man should strike, provides help with transportation, assigns people to aid in the mission, and helps the prospective martyr prepare a last message to his family.” “Here’s an example of a video that we also do, if they want that,” al Makkah said, presenting Davis with an unmarked black video casette done to commemorate one of the istikhidhs. In her book, Martyrs, Davis describes what the video contains: “. . . a young man of about 20 stands facing the camera, his forehead covered with a green headband with Qur’anic script dedicating himself to God. With triumphant music in the background, he declared his intention to die as a shaheed and asked for God’s blessings that his mission be successful. The youth appeared calm and resolute, and his final words were interspersed with pictures of Palestinians in battle scenes, firing rockets from barren hilltops, apparently at Israeli soldiers below. There was not the slightest hint of hesitation . . .” Al Makkah asserts he has “trained martyrs of all ages, from 16 to 65 years old.” Mind you, his training base is not in Palestine but in Lebanon, in the largest Palestinian refugee camp near the southern port of Sidon.

What prompted the British police and M-15 to crack down, without delay, on the suspects they say were plotting to plant bombs on commercial airliners bound from airports in the UK like Heathrow and Gatwick to the United States? According to the 29 August report in The New York Times, the decision was made when, on August 9, police discovered two young Muslim men, in a second-floor apartment in East London, had recorded a video justifying their “suicide plot” to blow up trans-Atlantic planes. The motive they stated was revenge against the US and its ‘accomplices,’ Britain and the Jews.” “As you bomb, you will be bombed: as you kill, you will be killed,” said one of the men on his “martyrdom” video tape. The youth added that he hoped Allah would be “pleased with us and accept our deed.” As it happened, the
article revealed, the police had already been monitoring the apartment with hidden video and audio equipment. NYT correspondents Don Van Natta Jr. and Elaine Sciolino wrote that “the virulent language of seven recovered martyrdom videotapes is among new details that emerged from interviews with high-ranking British, other European and American officials... demonstrating that the suspects had made considerable progress toward planning a terrorist attack.”

Scotland Yard dispatched policemen along with M-15 operatives to arrest 21 suspects in the early hours of August 10. Most of them were British-born citizens of Pakistani origin. Why Pakistanis? I had a long session with our friend, Pakistan’s Ambassador Muhammad Naeem Khan about this phenomenon—shortly after he invited me for a 10-day working visit to his country (from Karachi, to Lahore, Rawalpindi, Islamabad and Peshawar—the latter the crossroads of jihadi training and intrigue, one of my favorite haunts in my younger days). In any event, returning to the subject at hand, it was those suicide video-tapes, similar to those put on the website by suicide-bombers in Palestine and Lebanon—and, lately, the release by al-Qaeda of a “martyrdom” video made by one of the hijackers before he and his companions seized an airplane to crash into the World Trade Center on 9/11. The eerie message was: Death to you Infidels, crusaders and Jews, and Allah Akhbar (God is great!). I wish God could be great without His martyrs killing so many helpless people.

Journalist Richard Ben Cramer, who won a Pulitzer Prize for Middle East reporting in 1979 (his articles appeared in TIME, Newsweek, and The New York Times Magazine) asks a pertinent question in his book, How Israel Lost (Simon and Schuster, London, Toronto, 2004). How can it happen (as the Jews so often ask) that a Palestinian mother celebrates at the funeral of her son, a suicide bomber: “How could a mother be like that?” the Israelis wail. Cramer reports of the Israeli reaction that “they have to keep a simple explanation at the ready, such as “They’re animals,” or “human life means nothing to them,” or, “Well, it’s just different when we have one child or two in the family, and they have 12. They’ll just make more children!”

“But,” Cramer opines, “it is never said—in conversation, on TV, or in the Hebrew newspapers—that the mother of a ‘martyr-bomber’ has no choice. It is a matter of honor... In fact, the honor of a woman and her family is all (and almost only) about her sons. It is her duty and destiny to produce sons for the tribe... which is why, after she gives birth (say,
to a first son named Khaled), her own name will forever recede, while she is called by her kin (and by her neighbors, and every shopkeeper) Umm Khaled—Mother of Khaled.” “That’s also,” the author notes, “as Americans ask—why all those Palestinian commandos show up in the papers with those wacky names—impossible for a proper Yank to keep straight—Abu This and Abu That. ‘Abu’ simply means, ‘Father of . . .’”

In short, Cramer concludes: “The mother of a suicide bomber may mourn and cry for her son forever. But if she isn’t seen at his funeral making the sound of joy—a high trilling noise from the back of the throat, the same sound she would have made at his wedding—then she would not be seen to accept the honor of his death for the family. If she would not tell the TV cameras, when she’s interviewed afterward, that she is proud of her dead son—that she would give all her sons—then she dishonors her whole tribe’s struggle and her family, altogether. She would be stripping the honor of her kin, of her name, of her own life (and her son’s) . . . it is unthinkable.” If a mother sobbs and weeps, she must do so in private. Doing so in public would be unforgivable.

This journalist has been to Israel, Palestine, Jordan and Egypt several times since the mid-1960s. I’ve spoken to Israelis and Palestinians (not only in the West Bank and Gaza, but in Lebanon and other Arab countries).

The way I see it, peace may never be in prospect. On the part of the Jews, it was inevitable that the assassinated peace leader, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, once one of the Israeli Defense Forces’ most ferocious and most-decorated generals, would be murdered by a young Jewish zealot. As for the Palestinians, can they ever reconcile with Israel? For two generations they’ve lived in squalor and pain in refugee camps (other Arab societies simply refuse to integrate them) dreaming of their return to recover the homes seized by the Jews from them or their parents, fighting for the triumphant recovery of their “ancestral land.” There is too much blood on the ground, there have been too many betrayals, too many dashed hopes, too much angst and accusation on either side. Britain’s Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, after negotiating with Adolf Hitler in Munich, declared jauntily when he returned to London that he had achieved “Peace in our time.” This delusion was soon rudely shattered by Hitler’s legions and Panzerwagen smashing into Poland, raucously singing, “Ade Polenland!”
In the Middle East, particularly in Israel and Palestine, there seems to be no hope of peace at any time—whether today or in the future. Chamberlain, although he went down in political disgrace, at least could briefly be deluded. In the Holy Land, no illusions seem to be left – only a legacy of hatred passed on from one generation to the next. Am I too pessimistic? David Ben Gurion once said, you cannot believe in Israel unless you believe in miracles. I don’t see any Miracle coming—but God moves in mysterious ways, we were taught from childhood.

September 15, 2006

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After two days of sending out messages through Papal emissaries that his address delivered in Ravensburg, Germany, had been misunderstood, the Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI formally “apologized” before Angelus Prayer yesterday before a large audience of pilgrims in his summer palace, Castelgandolfo, in Italy. (In Germany, the Supreme Pontiff had quoted an obscure Medieval text which characterized some of the Prophet’s teachings as “evil and inhuman.”) It rained on His Holiness’s speech and blessing, soaking many of his respectful audience, but the Pope’s globally-televisioned . . . well, sort of retraction, apparently fell on deaf Muslim ears.

Pakistan had been the first to furiously react, summoning the Papal Legate in Islamabad, and its parliament passing a vote of angry censure. No wonder, all of London’s suicide-bombers (except one, a teen-aged Jamaican convert), who exploded bombs in the Tube—the underground trains—and exploded a London bus on 27 July 2005 were British-born citizens of Pakistani descent. Most of the twenty-one suspects originally arrested last August 9 for allegedly plotting to blow up commercial airlines bound from British airports for the United States, were also British citizens of Pakistani origin!

Pres. Pervez Musharraf may have allied his country with the US on 14 September 2001 a few days after 9/11—rejecting his old friends in the Taliban—but he’s having trouble restraining the militant and fundamentalist Islamists in his country, or keeping Osama bin Laden and his Taliban allies from skipping in and out of the Pushtun region in his northwest, with impunity. Two almost successful attempts have already been made on General Musharraf’s life. Additionally, his
recent orders for all "foreign students" (mostly Arabs) to be sent away from Pakistan's madrassahs (religious schools) and for the madrassahs themselves to adopt a more practical curriculum, aside from exclusively Qu'ranic studies are being defied by the imams and mullahs.

It's increasingly clear that the nation carved out of old colonial India by its founder, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, at midnight on August 11, 1947 (at that time with close to 80 million Muslims comprising its population) remains as he called it The Land of the Pure." In sum, it is purely and sometimes violently devoted to Islam. Jinnah died on 11 September 1948 and was buried in the heart of Karachi, his birthplace. He was called Quaid-I-Azam, the Great Leader—and his strongly anti-Hindu spirit (he detested the late Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and the antipathy was mutual) and rejection of Christians, the distrusted "Angleez"—although he studied for the Law in London and sported English clothes and even a monacle—suffuses today's Pakistanis as well. Interestingly enough, Jinnah had been born on Christmas Day in 1878, the first of seven children. Life is full of such ironies.

As for the Holy Father's so-called offensive remarks at the tail-end of his otherwise triumphant tour of his native Germany, he should have been more careful. Six months ago, the entire Islamic world had violently reacted to the publication of a few cartoons in an obscure Danish newspaper which Muslims fumed had insulted the Prophet Muhammad. What more any remarks which could be construed insulting to the Prophet from the head of the Catholic Church which has 1.3 billion adherents throughout the world! Oh, Papa Ratzni! The Pope's remarks may not have been intended to be either malicious or provocative—but now Christians and Christian churches will be savaged in many Muslim countries. Egypt has withdrawn its ambassador from the Vatican and others will probably follow suit.

By golly, the Muslims all over the umma have discovered the power of rage and going berserk. What will they do? Threaten to bomb all Christians and burn down their embassies and consulates? Somehow, a cap must be put on all these explosions of awful, mob-generated violence. The trouble is that every criticism is being interpreted as a conspiracy against Islam. Alas, jihad has become the most fashionable war cry of Muslims all over this troubled planet. Sanamagana. The blood-letting of the Crusades was centuries ago—so enough already.

Among the Muslim countries that resentfully reacted to the Pope's message was Turkey, which has been seeking admission into the
European Union. I guess the Holy Father, who had been scheduled to visit Istanbul, will have to cancel his trip for his own safety's sake. The Pope, in his “apology,” stated that the ancient Byzantine quotation he had mentioned did not represent his own personal thinking—and added it was time for dialogue between Islam and Christianity. In the aftermath of the backlash against the Pope's perceived “criticism” of the Prophet (for “there is no God but Allah and Muhammad is His Prophet”) there’s little hope for that—for the moment. Yet, as a noncleric and amateur historian, who could blame the Byzantines for their negative view of the Muslims and their Prophet? Over the centuries, since the Emperor Constantine's conversion to Christianity in 312 (his mother, Sta. Monica, had “discovered” the shards of the true Cross on which Jesus was crucified), Constantinople—renamed “Istanbul” after the Muslim Turks conquered Byzantium—had become the arsenal and reliquary of the Christian Faith.

Among the holy relics “registered” to have been carried in procession and the dedication of Constantinople (named after the Emperor, whose immense statue had been placed atop a tall column of porphyry more than 100 feet tall) were “crumbs of bread from which Christ had fed the five thousand” on the Mount of Beatitudes; the crosses on which the two thieves had been crucified on either side of Jesus at Calvary; the alabaster box which contained the ointment with which Mary Magdalene had anointed Jesus’ feet; and a fragment of the “true Cross.” In any event, a great church was erected called the Church of the Holy Wisdom, Haghia Sophia, and filled with such relics. The pieces of the Cross were, historians say, kept in a chest on a golden altar. There, too, were allegedly other relics of the Passion—the Crown of Thorns, and Sponge, and slabs from the Tomb of rock.

Byzantium’s Emperor Alexis Comnenus was reputed to have written to Robert, Count of Flanders, somewhat boastfully, in 1095, of the rich spiritual treasures of his kingdom, already being called the “New Jerusalem.” He declared: “You will find more of it at Constantinople than in the entire world, for the treasures of the Basilicas alone would be sufficient to furnish all the churches of Christendom and all their treasures cannot together amount to those of St. Sophia, which riches have never been equalled even in the Temple of Solomon.”

Don't reproach the Byzantines for their anti-Muslim feeling—and polemics. In the spring of 670 a large fleet of small vessels crammed with Muslim warriors appeared in the Hellespont, sailed down the
Bosthorous, and attacked Byzantium. Unsuccessful at first, the Arabs built a fortified Camp close to the city and assaulted it each spring from 671 to 676. In one assault as many as 30,000 were killed. The Byzantines fought the Arabs on land and sea. In the late spring of 717, a huge Arab army of 80,000 men once more attacked but was repelled by the Byzantines’ invention of “Greek fire,” an early form of napalm, which devastated and incinerated the ships of the invading Muslims.

A month later, a fleet of 1,800 boats full of soldiers with 20 larger warships from Egypt sailed into the Sea of Marmara. This time the assault was much fiercer by land and water, but again the Byzantines managed to repel them, with a loss by the attacker of 20,000 lives. The historian Sebeos, reviewing these repeated attacks beginning in the 7th century well described the threat that Islam represented: “For just as arrows fly from the well-curved bow of a strong man toward the target, so are the Arabs who come from the Sinai desert to destroy the entire world with hunger, the sword, and great terror.”

Finally, a Turkish army under Sultan Mehmet II in 1453, swarmed over the walls, massacred everybody including the Emperor himself, but kept alive the little boys to be brought up as Muslims—to form a special guard when they grew to manhood named the Janissaries.

I’ve been to Istanbul three times, touring much of Turkey on one trip, and traveling to Ankara to pay my respects at the imposing marble mausoleum of the great Mustapha Kemal Ataturk, the Father of Modern Turkey (he was one of my boyhood heroes)—but the Byzantines’ curse of the Muslims, indeed, came true. Very little remains of Christianity in Turkey—the hundreds of Christian churches are but a memory—and the great Church of Haghia Sophia is now a Muslim mosque (indeed, an exhibition for tourists). Where are the Christian “relics”? They’re nowhere to be found.

September 18, 2006

The coup d’etat staged in the dead of night in Thailand caught that country’s controversial Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra by surprise (as military coups are supposed to do). We’ll know soon enough whether it was lucky for Mr. Thaksin, whose political fortunes
were in a slump anyway, to have been away in New York at the United Nations—or unfortunate for him. Had he been in Bangkok when the kudeta took place, he could either have "talked" the generals out of it (not likely, since they hated him), or been shot "by accident."

Will the putschists succeed in forming a new government? As usual, it all depends on His Majesty, the King. Up to this writing, His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej has uttered not a word, but this statement could, in the interim period, be overtaken by events. In short, in the Kingdom of Thailand—although he is no longer, unlike his late forebears an absolute monarch but a "constitutional" monarch—the universally beloved King Bhumibol can either anoint or completely reject a coup d'etat. If the latter takes place, the generals and officers who mounted the putsch are generally, after the requisite grovelling in abject penitence before the throne, permitted to flee the country.

Thaksin, in New York had to cancel his scheduled UN speech, but has been insisting he is still in "command." Let's see. Since the results of the last election were nullified, and no new election has as yet been held, Thaksin's position—even without a coup to overthrow him—is tenuous at best, and his Thai rak Thai (Thai Love Thai) party is in a bit of disarray, indicating that there's no love lost between some of its members and the aggressive urban population which runs the country. It's almost axiomatic to say that Thaksin may be hated in Bangkok and other urban centers, but is adored by the peasantry and the people in the provinces, particularly in the impoverished north, with the exception of the three Muslim-dominated provinces in the south where a bitter hit-and-run insurgency has erupted in the past three years, both against Thaksin and the majority Buddhists). However, will the peasants come storming into Bangkok to uphold Thaksin and rout the tanks and military men who have seized the area of the prime minister's office and the main boulevards and streets? Judging from the past, it's not likely. To risk sounding repetitious, it's only the King who can clarify the situation by his direct intervention.

I hope the Thai coup doesn't inspire any silly copy-cat movement among the usual ambitious and restless elements in our armed forces—meaning the ones who were not arrested and in the calaboose awaiting court martial for the February 24 "aborted" caper. As for me, I think our young officers and their soldiers are a bit weary by now of such zarzuelas.
The fact is that Thailand used to be known as “The Land of Coups.” There were 23 coups or unsuccessful coup attempts in Thailand—it was almost a national habit—until 1991. (Correct me if I’m wrong, but the next in frequency of coup plots was Argentina). Since 1991, Thailand had its share of riots, violent demonstrations, and clashes between soldiers, police and civilians, but no kudeta. The world began to think that the “coup mentality” had vanished and that “The Land of Smiles” had replaced the “Land of Coups.” In fact, this writer had just landed at Don Muang International Airport in 1991 when, from the arrival hall, we heard cannon fire from the direction of the city. The European passengers were the most alarmed. They nervously asked: “What’s that?” To those who put the question to me, I answered that it must be a coup because it sounded like a putsch I had witnessed several years earlier. When we got into town, indeed, a coup had taken place. It had tragic consequences since a well-known foreign journalist and a photographer had been accidentally slain in the course of it. A tank, firing a shell, hit a wall, and the ricochet of pieces of shrapnel had killed the foreign correspondent, while a stray bullet (if I remember right) had hit the lensman. There was gloom in the foreign correspondents’ club that day—it used to be situated in the Dusit Thani Hotel, fronting Lumpini Park. The King squelched the coup in high dudgeon. He disowned it completely—and that was that. Bangkok returned to normal. The tanks and armored cars disappeared.

What’s fascinating about the current coup is that the Army Chief who led it, Gen. Sondhi Boonyaratkalin, 59, is a Muslim. How he got to be chief of the army when his officers and men are more than 95 percent Buddhist may be an indication of the secular setup of the military. General Sondhi intends to organize a new government, it’s obvious by now. Of course, he and his officers have trotted out the usual hi-falutin’ and idealistic reasons for taking over—like the need to heal the political rift, restore “unity”, the necessity of ousting Thaksin who had ruined the country, and so forth. But the stark reality of it is that the elections scheduled for next November have been cancelled by the putschists. General Sondhi is stating that he himself will step out in two weeks, and once a new Prime Minister is chosen, that post coup “interim government” will not hold office for more than one year, and that a general election will be scheduled for October 2007. Don’t hold your breath waiting for that promised election. If they manage
to form a so-called “interim government,” Sondhi may decide to stay as the “adviser” to the new handpicked Prime Minister. His boys will begin to enjoy power so much they will devise a way for themselves to stay—forever, or as long as possible. They will shuck their uniforms, put on mufti, and preen themselves as having saved democracy—for themselves, naturally. The Constitution could be revised, too. Oh well. A military dictatorship is not new to Thailand. What’s unfortunate is that the clock has been turned back to those old days when the likes of Pibum Songgram and Prem Tinasoldna ruled the roost. Yep, as an old Thai hand (when I was a young journalist, I even lived for a spell in the Bangkapi area which used to be the “red light” district) those were periods of strongman control.

Even opposition leaders didn’t decry the military move such as former Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai (who is a member of the Democrat Party) who was ambivalent about the overnight coup. He said that “as politicians we do not support any kind of coup, but during the past five years, the government of Thaksin . . . caused the crisis in the country.” One thing is clear: Thaksin is out. If he comes home from New York, he may be arrested and, as General Sondhi hints, tried for his . . . well, transgressions. A report from New York says that he has chartered a Russian plane to fly him and his intimates to London, where he owns a mansion and where one of his daughters is studying. In this light, although he continues to deny it, he may seek asylum.

The putschists, led by General Sondhi, after canceling the Constitution and the Constitutional court, and telling businessmen and political leaders to report to headquarters to be “briefed” on the new order, went in a motorcade to the Palace to pay obeisance to the King. In sum, Sondhi and company want the people to see that His Majesty approves of their overthrow of the Thaksin government and their new initiative.

I don’t grieve overmuch for Mr. Thaksin, really. If you’ll recall, he’s the guy who insultingly bad-mouthed us Filipinos for allegedly having cheated our way to victory in the Southeast Asian Games here in Manila. Thaksin accused our sports officials and referees of having maliciously officiated in the SEA-Games in order to make sure the Philippines had the greatest harvest of golds. The Thais, on the prompting of Thaksin, kept on running on their television that sequence in which our Filipino contender had cut into the lane of the Thai runner so as to box him
out and win the gold. (Thai TV did not mention at that time that the gold medal had been taken away from the erring Filipino athlete, who was reprimanded and suspended, and awarded to the Thai instead). *Sanamagan*, we were portrayed as a nation of crooks, cheaters—and would you believe, pickpockets!

Thaksin started out as a policeman, before he became an electronic billionaire. His downfall came when his family sold its controlling stake in his business empire to Temasek Holdings of Singapore for billions, without paying a cent in taxes.

Will His Majesty, the King intervene—and thus save Thaksin? I don’t know whether General Sondhi, as the rumor the military promoted goes, is “close” to the King, but His Majesty doesn’t like Thaksin—that I can deduce from his words in the past and body language. In his annual birthday speech on December 4, 2003, for example, His Majesty asserted: “I know the prime minister does not like to be criticized because criticism makes us angry. But let me tell you about criticism: even when I was forty to fifty, the Princess Mother praised me, said I was clever, and she liked what I did, she would add, don’t get carried away. She said every time, don’t forget yourself, don’t float. She used the word, float, float, float, keep your feet on the ground.” Later in his speech, the King pointed out, “... The Prime Minister is responsible for everything. So he must accept criticism ... If one person is responsible, people will point at him ... Read the newspapers. If they say the government did wrong and acted too violently, go and check. ... If their criticism is correct, thank them. If it is not right, tell them it was not right—go easy.”

The Thais await His Majesty’s verdict on the coup, but they seem to have already accepted it. Their attitude is as it has always been, as expressed in their favorite expression: “Mai pen rai.” This means “never mind,” and is close to our own, “bahala na.” If things get worse, mai pen rai. If the weather is too hot, mai pen rai.

The Thai taxi drivers of today are well mannered and polite. In the good old days, they were daredevil drivers, zooming about with abandon and the heck with the brakes. We would call them kamikaze, and when we used to warn them to slow down, and be careful, they would grin and sing out, mai pen rai! The other operative word is sanuk—which means “having fun” or “doing good.” It’s sanuk to enjoy a good meal, Sanuk to be out with friends. Perhaps the coup will produce a better government—so it’s sanuk. And, don’t forget, mai pen rai.
There used to be a protocol about military coups. As in the present one, they would be mounted in the dead of night, or very early in the morning, in order that the new government might have a whole day in office.

One of my best friends in media, who used to be famous in television, wined and dined everywhere, a real celebrity. Pichai Wasanosong emerged too early as the spokesman of one coup attempt. Alas, he announced the coup and called for support for the putschists. But the coup failed. Pichai was arrested and slapped into jail. After a few years, he was released—and I rushed to Bangkok to welcome him back to freedom and toast his having survived his ordeal. We went to the Red Door on Suriwong, next to the celebrated Patpong I and Patpong II. My friend was philosophical about his “mistake.” He remained irreverent and full of fun, but he never regained his former niche in media or his popularity. During our reunion, I jokingly reminded him of what the late Manila Times columnist Teodoro “Doroy” Valencia had admonished me when I started writing my own column. Doroy had said: “Never predict anything unless you know it already happened.” Pichai replied: “I’ve learned that already—the hard way.” As for the present coup. No predictions on my part, until I see how the King reacts.

September 21, 2006

The People’s Republic of China, once a pariah and “doomed” to failure in the world’s eyes after the June 1989 Tiananmen Square “massacre,” is now the Travel Destination of the Year. In ancient times the saying went that “all roads lead to Rome.” Not anymore. Even Wal-Mart and Starbucks—and yes, Versace—are making a beeline for China.

The other day, French Pres. Jacques Chirac was in Beijing, portrayed on the front pages shaking hands with China’s Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing—a “hail-fellow-well-met”, I well recall, and a former aide and translator of the late Chairman Deng Xiaoping. I first met him with Chairman Deng in the Fujian Room of the Great Hall of the People when, as a member of the Philippines’ Foreign Policy Council, I
accompanied the late Vice-President and concurrently Foreign Affairs Secretary Salvador Laurel to Beijing in 1988.

It was at that session that Deng first announced to us that the Spratlys “belonged” to China.”What do you call our Nansha Islands?” That’s what he had asked Doy and our group. Vice-President Laurel, in a stage whisper heard all over the room, turning to us, inquired: “Ano ba yung (expletive deleted) Nansha islands?” I whispered back, lamely, “I think he’s referring to Admiral Cloma’s Freedom Land off Palawan.” Beside me, the late Ambassador Luis Moreno Salcedo—one of our finest diplomats who looked like one, too—correctly replied: “It’s our Kalayaan islands, sir!” Deng blinked, grinned impishly, and remarked in his heavily-accented Sichuan-Mandarin: “Whatever you call it, don’t forget those islands belong to China—but let’s leave a debate on that for another day. In the meantime, let’s have a friendly discussion.” He was a nonstop chain smoker who lit each fresh cigarette from the glowing tip of the one which was down to the butt. He also would spit into a spittoon (at his left foot, naturally) with uncanny accuracy. It had been suave Li Xiaoxing (later Ambassador to the US) who finessed the charming, small but powerful Deng’s remarks into smooth diplomatics. We laughed over that incident when we met in Malacañang a few months ago. Mr. Li continues to be in the news. Last Saturday, there he was smiling toothily in a five-column top of the front page photograph, with a grim-looking US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who had gone to Beijing to ask China to help break the stalemate over North Korea’s nuclear bomb.

The biggest invasion of China (after those of Kentucky Fried Chicken and McDonald’s many years ago) is that of “Starbucks” coffee. Indeed, when you walk out of the luggage pick-up and Customs zone in Beijing’s international airport, the first thing you see before you is a Starbucks along with Kentucky Fried Chicken. (Perhaps you should have stayed home? Sus, there goes the fairy tale about an exotic China, imbued with the mysteries of the East. It’s now wolfing down the overpriced coffee of the West). According to reports, Starbucks plans to roll out about 100 new stores a year in China. The coffee chain’s ambition is to establish a network in China that will rival its outlets in the United States itself. They used to attack “Coca-Colonialism” in the Far East, Middle East, and Europe during the Cold War era as the evil imperialistic force emanating from capitalist America. Today, they’ll have to buck Starbucks, which has established 40,000 cafes and
outlets all over the planet! That company has opened over 200 stores in China since 1999 and plans to push into the hinterland. By gosh, even when you take a romantic dinner-cruise on the Huang Pu River, which separates Shanghai proper and Pudong, there you see the "Starbucks" neon blazing over its riverside cafe in the Pudong bank, and a few meters down that of McDonald's. In Huangzhou, where the honeymoon paradise of West Lake lies, there are Starbucks cafes downtown (beside Haagen Dazs) and beside the lake, too, in Huangzhou's snazzy replica of Xintiandi.

Another Western designer icon going into China is Versace, now being run by Donatella Versace, sister of the late Gianni Versace—who, by the way, had been murdered by one of his . . . uh, intimate friends, an American of Filipino origin. Donatella, according to Tom Mitchell of the Financial Times, wrote a report yesterday on Ms. Versace's plan to set up nine more stores in China by the end of next year. The budget for it is allegedly euros 8 million or $10 million. Versace currently has five wholly-owned outlets in the country, including three in Hong Kong and one each in Beijing and Shanghai. Why in China, which is notorious for counterfeit copies and knock-offs of famous brand names, including Versace itself, Armani, Louis Vuitton, Prada, Fendi, Christian Dior, and others? Apparently, there are many big buyers in China among the nouveau riche (my Shanghai friends call them "the upstarts") who made money fast and insist on purchasing only the real thing. Perhaps Donatella is right. If you can't lick the copycats—join 'em.

Ever since this writer got back from Shanghai, naughty people have been . . . well, pestering me as to where the clandestine stalls peddling the knock-offs and counterfeit "designer" goods which used to be openly and blatantly sold in Shanghai's biggest tiangge, an open-air market called Xiangyang Fashion Mart can now be found. The market, a mecca for tourists and out-of-towners who flocked to Shanghai to shop for years—where you could snap up Rolex, IWC, Cartier, Patek-Phillip, Omega, etc. watches for peanuts, or the biggest brands in handbags, luggage, Burberry coats, and all sorts of clothing, including one-dollar "Armani" socks—in sharp contrast in terms of price to those genuine items being sold in Three-on-the-Bund—was closed down with much fanfare by the Shanghai authorities a few months ago. The Chinese government thus "appeased" the US and the European Union, which were grumping over the insolent runaway
theft of “intellectual property.” In sum the disappearance of Xiangyang Market was a major blow to eager bargain hunters. After some research done by my underground sources, we discovered that some of the shops had relocated themselves—secretly?—to air-conditioned three-by-three or four-by-four outlets in Pudong.

If you’ll recall, when the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) ministers met in Shanghai the other year, they convened in the streamlined Shanghai Science and Technology Museum, in Century Square—the very hinterland of the Pudong New Area occupying an area of 96,000 sq. meters. The unique ovate hall occupies a site of 70,000 cubic meters by itself, and is ultramodern, crystalline, and glittering at night. Anyway, the APEC delegates angrily condemned counterfeiting and “theft of intellectual property” in their meeting there. Guess where you’ll find the refugee shops from Xiangyang? In the underground corridors radiating from the admission ticket booth of the Museum (and Casino)—yep, that’s where the Chinese impudently concealed them! Hey, get there quick before they move again. The U. S. spooks, and European revenue investigators are hot on their trail.

If you’re after excellent, very low-priced garments, shirts, blouses, scarves, sportswear, luggage, in fact everything in a cornucopia of excess, you don’t have to go to Pudong. Just ten minutes by taxi from The Bund in Shanghai are buildings containing thousands of tiny stalls, overflowing with goods. Although you’ll see some fake designer brands, most of them carry Chinese labels but are of the same quality—and cost only from ten to 120 yuan or RMB. Don’t forget, many Western designer labels are manufactured “on license” by the Chinese and these goods probably come from the same factories or sweat shops. The teeming avenue where these shops are located—on either side—is Qi Pu street (pronounced, significantly, chipu). The other side of the street is Shin Qi Pu (“New” Chipu). Don’t get me wrong. As a Saluyot, I’m not a world-class shopper, not even a low-class shopper. I just like walking around to see how people live and work. Anyway, this is your free “guide” to Shanghai’s shopping delights. The food there, too, is delicious, representing almost every cuisine in China in a metropolis of 16 million where everybody goes. But in that department, I’m no expert, so ask somebody else.

Just as there are shops endlessly from corner to corner, for instance along Chang Li Road in Pudong, there’s a restaurant or food outlet in the same profusion. When we were kids, my grandmother used to
admonish us: “Eat, eat— don’t you know people are starving in China?” In China these days, grandmas probably tell their grandchildren to eat everything on their plate, “because people are starving in the Philippines.”

Not everything is hunky-dory in China, though. The biggest corruption scandal is the subject of ongoing investigation in Shanghai where the Party Boss himself, a member of the ruling Politburo is under arrest. Some 17,500 officials all over have been arrested, too. Last year, the party committee responsible for party discipline investigated about 147,000 corruption cases. The People’s Supreme Court has reported that over 10,000 officials were convicted on corruption charges in the first six months of 2006. The indication there is that this may only be the tip of the iceberg—but at least those caught are being convicted. What about over here in our country? Some get away, even in China’s . . . uh police state. The Ministry of Commerce itself recently estimated that 4,000 officials (as reported by Jim Yardley of The New York Times) have fled overseas in recent years, taking with them $50 billion in embezzled money. In 2005, Yardley went on to reveal, the National Audit Office found $35 billion in state funds “misappropriated.” If we had a real honest-to-goodness investigation here, the mind boggles as to what we might find. That Fertilizer Scandal which hogs the headlines up to now would look like some petty caper. Anyhow, our Presidenta is China-bound. By the time she gets back on November 3, I trust she’ll bring back a few ideas about infrastructure improvement, building, efficiency—and fighting corruption.

China is not democratic. China has still a long way to go. Probably more than 250 million migrant workers are being cruelly exploited in their own country. There have been 75,000 peasant demonstrations in a country where the peasantry once won for Mao Zedong a great Communist Revolution. But China is striving and trying. Here, unless we get off our self-complacent butts, it will be the status quo forever. And the status quo is disappointing—and, worse, often disgusting. We talk endlessly about our EDSA People Power Revolution. Yet, EDSA itself remains the dirtiest, dingiest, darkest, most traffic-clogged highway in the world.

October 27, 2006
Before the interest in sinners and saints provoked by our observance of All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day evaporates, I'd like to bring your attention to a fascinating article by Thomas J. Craughwell published in The Wall Street Journal last Tuesday. Craughwell, the author of a new book entitled Saints Behaving Badly (Doubleday, 2006) discusses in his piece whether a cop-killer can be a "saint." The need to debate such a thorny issue surfaced when the retired Archbishop of Paris, Cardinal Jean Marie Lustiger, in 1987, began the formal process by which Jacques Fesch, a convicted murderer guillotined by the French state in 1957 might be "declared a saint of the Roman Catholic Church."

According to the author, Fesch's case has provoked widespread interest in France. Amazon.com's French site lists a dozen books about the repentant killer, including editions of his letters from death row after he returned to the Catholic faith. Susmariosept, I can only say about the Archbishop's nomination of that murderer and executed death convict for the halo of Sainthood. By golly, what would Mother Teresa say if a newly-minted St. Fesch were to sidle up to her in the heavenly clouds and greet her with "Bonjour, Sis, I'm in your club now!" Mother Teresa spent her life in sacrifice and in caring for the poor and hopeless in the slums of Kolkata (Calcutta). Fesch, as Craughwell describes him, "was the wastrel son of a wealthy family, a chronic adulterer who divorced his wife, and a Playboy who produced an illegitimate child, whom he abandoned. By his own admission, Fesch fantasized about sailing to the South Pacific, where he could live a life of perfect hedonism. Alas, his parents refused to bankroll such a scheme." What then did he do? On February 25, 1954, he barged into a Paris currency dealer's shop, grabbed 300,000 francs from the till, pistol-whipped the proprietor, and then ran out the door. Jean Vergne, a 35-year-old French police officer appeared on the scene and called on the fleeing Fesch to surrender. Fesch, instead, shot Vergne three times through the heart. Vergne, a widower with a four-year-old daughter, "was dead before he hit the pavement." At his trial, Craughwell narrated, the cop-killer was surly and unrepentant. The Court rightly sentenced him to death.

When in prison, as Fesch stated, "the spirit of the Lord seized me by the throat." He became a changed man, devoted to prayer and meditation, etc. His letters "inspired" those who read them. Once more, I can only say, even though a confirmed sinner, placing a halo on this guy would be a serious mistake by the Church. And to think that Saint Bernadette Soubirous, the heroic little girl who saw our
Blessed Mother, the “Immaculate Conception” at Lourdes, had to go through so much suffering and scorn, as well, until after many decades following her painful death she was finally acknowledged to be a saint.

Can you imagine Converted Killer Fesch’s life story being incorporated into a book like The Lives of the Saints and all Catholic little boys and girls urged to emulate his life and, uh, “good works”? Admittedly, he may have been taken into the bosom of Our Heavenly Father, and be in truth a saint, adding his voice to the Angel Chorus, but to hold him up for veneration as a duly certified “saint” by the Vatican seems to me rather ridiculous. Without promoting the cause of Fesch, though, Craughwell remarks that “the Church’s standard for sainthood allows for something less than perfection.” Perhaps the first saint, after all, was St. Dimas, the so-called Good Thief who hung on a cross beside that of Jesus on Calvary. He was promised Sainthood by Christ Himself, who pledged Dimas, “This day thou shalt be with me in paradise!” Dimas is a good Saint for politicians and journalists—but his biography is not available. Then, consider St. Callixtus of Rome, who died in 222: “He was an embezzler, a brawler, a twice-convicted felon. Yet, Callixtus was touched by grace, repented, became a priest, was elected Pope, and died a martyr!”

In truth, the Catholic calendar overflows with notorious men and women who turned their lives around and became Saints. For Chrissakes, the Lord even forgave St. Peter (Simon) who had denied him three times before the cock crowed, and proclaimed him The Rock on whom Christ built His church—the first Pope, indeed. St. Camillus de Lelis (1550-1614) was an Italian condotieri, a mercenary soldier, a cardsharp and con-man. St. Moses, the Ethiopian (c. 330-405) was a gang leader of a bunch of cutthroats in the Sahara, the Egyptian desert. St. Hippolytus set himself as the first “antipope”. And, Craughwell adds, “St. Pelagia was the porn queen of fifth-century Antioch.” Her contemporary St. John Chrysostom, recalled that “nothing was more vile than she was, when she was on stage.” Mea culpa, I hope my own sainted mother will forgive me for citing the above-mentioned anecdote of Craughwell. For she was named “Pelagia”, as were many thousands of virtuous women in our country. I remember when I was a kid, our Sto. Domingo “queen” of the fiesta was named Ms. Pelagia Primeras, too.

Let me end as I began. The cop-killer Fesch named a Saint by the Vatican? It doesn’t seem likely. And I hope not. From the non-
exemplary life he led, he's not a candidate for canonization – even though the saying that "there is more joy in Heaven for a sinner doing penance" than the virtuous life of a good man. I hope, since I'm a candidate for the opposite (Marca Deemonyo? That's what we drank when we were young bucks), Fesch won't get that "Good House-Saint" guarantee from the Church. Yet, strange things happen when you discuss religion, or declare that you're doing things like suicide-bombing, murder, or sabotage, because "God commanded" you. Many an over-pious zealot gets the wrong message from God. You know, "lost in translation."

November 3, 2006

OSAKA, Kansai, Japan—Yesterday, the AP and other wire service photographs of U.S. Pres. George W. Bush, posing in Hanoi with his Vietnamese host, Vietnam's Pres. Nguyen Minh Triet, showed the once superpower president looking tired, uncertain, his brow furrowed. Behind them, of course, was a huge bust of the departed Ho Chi Minh who had booted the Americans out of the country after years of devastating war. In the end, of course, while North Vietnam and Hanoi won the war, the former South Vietnam triumphed—Messrs. Triet and the new Prime Minister both come from the South.

Even my old friend, former businessman Phan Van Khai, who became prime minister in 1997 and unleashed a series of revolutionary reforms, came from the South, maintained a big mansion in Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), and enjoyed a Parisian lifestyle. In sum, Vietnam—while one must still tread cautiously since Communism's dialectic sometimes surfaces in unexpected places and some bureaucrats remain money-grubbing types—is on the rise. The current 7 percent surge in the economy must be taken in the context of the mid-1990s when the economy boomed by 8.6 percent until corruption dampened the enthusiasm of investors who had rushed in. As Bloomberg news put it, "the roof more or less caved in and investors fled." Today they're back in droves—and Hanoi is determined, this time, not to muffle it.

As for Mr. Bush, yesterday's Asahi news here reported that he turned very few heads in Hanoi when he arrived there Friday for the
APEC summit of twenty-one heads of state. (He'll meet our GMA for a 45-minute scheduled tete-a-tete either today or tomorrow). This is a cruel world. When a leader is down, he's down except with loyal friends like Britain's Tony Blair (whose fortunes are sinking, too) and Australia's John Howard. This is La Gloria's moment to tell her friend, Dubya, that the Philippines won't desert him this time, like she did in Iraq. Those kind words at a time of disappointment would be greatly appreciated.

For when all is said and done, Bush's Republicans may be down (and, luckily Rummy was washed out by the deluge), but he's still president of the great USA, and the Democrats will have to cooperate with the G.O.P. stragglers across the aisle for America to formulate an exit strategy from Iraq and resolve nagging domestic problems. Perhaps Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe will tell Bush that America, too, flies high in Japan—although with a Japanese flavor inserted into the mix.

When I got here Thursday night aboard an efficient Philippine Airlines Airbus 330 that whisked us to the Kansai International Airport from Manila in just three hours and 15 minutes, the first thing arriving passengers spotted when they emerged from the Customs arrival zone was the Starbucks kiosk in the arrival hall. There are more than sixty Starbucks coffee shops in Osaka City alone, even at the foot of the famous Shinsaibashi Bridge which leads to fabled Dotonburi. The coffee shop is even cheekily located in front of the world-famous giant Crab restaurant, and a few score yards up the street from the equally renowned candy-striped bespectacled drummer who's been robotically beating that drum for twenty years with his eyebrows going up and down. Everytime I come to Osaka, I make a beeline for Dotonburi and the plate of Okonomiyaki "omelet," the Kansai pancake.

The U. S. "invasion" is evident everywhere. Fifteen years ago, I met Den Fujita who owned the McDonald's franchise in Japan. He boasted he had 600 McDonald's outlets all over the land, and had even introduced the Teriyaki-burger to cater to the Japanese palate. Alas, McDonald's has ruined Japan's healthy diet of fish (tuna and others) and sashimi. The Japanese have taken to "junk food" like ducks to water. There are now more heart attacks than suicides. No gor janai ka, as we used to growl in the old Edo (Tokyo days). A few months ago, my friend Den Fujita had become so successful that he rated an obituary
in the *International Herald Tribune* which reported that he already had 1,400 McDonald's outlets in Japan by the time he kicked the bucket. Now he's in Burger Heaven. *Dai jobu*, Den-sensei, my old *tomodachi*! On almost every other corner you'll find the Golden Arches, Haagen Dazs ice cream, Baskin & Robbins, Starbucks, and even "Seattle's Best" replacing KOHI Nippon—*sanamagan*. Not to forget that old reliable, Kentucky Fried Chicken.

In fact, Osaka is celebrating a "Merry Christmas" today with even more boisterous enthusiasm and Christmas carols resounding all over its galleries, than back in Catholic Philippines. The lobby public floors of our Four Seasons' Nikko hotel is festooned with Christmas trees, both the evergreen and the white-as-snow variety. It's Jingle Bells on the intercom, or "We Wish You a Merry Christmas!" Across the street, in posh SOGO, the entrance sign blares out: "SOGO—*The Best Christmas*!" The department store features Christmas trees on each of its 14 floors and 15th floor rooftop—with one floor and the MARUZEN branch there selling hundreds of Christmas cards, some of them with Samurai prancing with umbrellas touting "Greetings of the Season" and Kimono-clad maidens proclaiming Merry X-Mas. Pop-up X-mas cards portray Japanese gardens, or choirs of Santa Claus yodeling "White Christmas." Some of them are battery-lighted, with X-mas caroling Santos chorusing under flashing beams of blue or red lights. The Japanese marry electronic genius with season's greetings—all to make money, of course. They're not Christians, really, but mostly Shinto and Buddhist believers—but the Osakans, and indeed everybody in the wealthy Kansai plain (Kobe and others) believe most in making money. The everyday greeting, as a matter of fact, is: "Mokarimakka?" meaning neither good morning, nor good day but "Are you making any money?" Osakans are proud of their blunt, forthright, down-to-earth sensibilities—considering themselves distinct from the upright, conceited, bureaucratic *Edokko*, the denizens of Tokyo, the capital. *Osaka-ben*, the earthy dialect of the Osakans, is full of guttural roll and tumble.

Coming back to "Christmas," the store windows are full of Santa Clauses, tannenbaums, snow-white Christmas scenes. Barkers in the galleries hold up signs, crying out: "Come in, terrific Christmas Sale!" Yes, they sell *belen*, replicas of the Christmas manger, and everything Christian—those cunning fellows. And what's more, the Japanese themselves enjoy Christmas as one of their jolliest holidays.
Nowhere is the Christmas spirit more evident than in "UNIVERSAL STUDIOS JAPAN." You bet. In Tokyo, they've for years been raking it in with Disney World Tokyo (24 million Japanese Miki-Mouse lovers arrived there annually) and, in the past six years with parallel theme park, Disney Sea. In Osaka, they've cloned "Universal Studios" from Los Angeles, complete with the globe turning around with the "Universal" logo—as you see in the Spiderman movies. You can pose for a photo in front of it, like Arnold Schwarzie in Terminator (there's even a "Terminator" Ride there). Inside the theme park, you can enjoy a boat ride with "JAWS," that gigantic shark suddenly rising out of the water to snap at you, or do the back-jogging "Back to the Future" ride through the Dinosaur's maw and the center of the earth; or a fantastic ride called "The Amazing Adventures of Spiderman" with Spidey and his various antagonists literally coming at you through your 3-D lenses as your gondola sails through each ear-popping scene. There's "Jurassic Park" ride—but beware if you dare venture on this ride, the finale takes you down the volcano into the water, a splashdown which—despite your plastic raincoat—will get you thoroughly soaked. Luckily, the kind-hearted doorman at the gate warned me of this, and suggested I go to the bayside to see the finale from a guardrail—and I gave that pneumonia-imperiling "thrill" a miss. There was "Snoopy's Playland," "E.T. Adventure," "Peter Pan's Neverland," "Waterworld," "Shrek's 3-D adventure—by golly, this is recommended highly—those special effects are really superb.

In any event, we paid for our own tickets, surprisingly, the ticket girl recommended the special Ilocano rate (in Japan, they're very helpful, courteous and polite—in sharp contrast to their wartime ferocity of another era). You don't even have to book a tour. Just follow your subway and Japan Railway map, and for a few hundred yen you'll find your way there – with the last two laps aboard a special Universal Studio train.

What's exciting is that Christmas is now the universal theme. The bags when you purchase anything proclaim: "UNIVERSAL WONDER CHRISTMAS," with the Sesame Street moppets merrily waving at you, from aboard a Santa sleigh pulled by prancing reindeer and a huge Christmas tree blazing behind. The music everywhere trumpets: "We wish you a merry Christmas," or "Oh Little Town of Bethlehem," "Hark the Herald Angels Sing," and every beloved carol. One thing is sure: the cash registers are singing, as Japanese visitors

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snap up every cute, Christmassy toy. Everything is in *Nippono*, naturally, even Shrek speaking pure *Nihongo*, and not one character from Spidey to E.T. or Peppermint Patty sprouting a word of *Eigo* (English). On a large stage, in front of a towering Christmas tree, however, a choir belts out Christmas carols in English then go into Japanese, too. UNIVERSAL STUDIOS Japan will turn five years old next year, and it’s going strong. And the American flag flies high there—with even the post office boxes stating: U.S. Post Office. They even have a Chirardelli square and Fisherman’s Wharf, San Francisco. When the Japanese clone anything, they do it perfectly.

PAL flies five times a week to the Kansai International Airport—a marvelous terminal and runways tagged KIX—and you really get a KIX out of going there. Years ago, this writer was invited to the inauguration of KIX, which had been put up on an island completely man-made in the middle of Osaka Bay. An efficient system of railroads, trains, buses, and a superhighway over water speeds you into Osaka, where you can also turn off into the railway to Kobe, or nearby Kyoto.

I hadn’t been back in Japan for more than five-and-a-half years, but I’m happy I decided to come this time. The Japanese have not changed, although their gadgetry (not just Play Station 3) has skyrocketed in quality, imagination, and reach. They remain friendly, courteous, scrupulously polite, helpful to strangers, and, by golly, queue up with total discipline, nobody trying to break ahead in a queue. Even their kids must be the best-behaved on earth—not the little monsters you find in many societies. I guess they pick up this sense of discipline, good deportment, and etiquette from their parents—and, despite their good manners, kids can be seen really having fun. Merry Christmas—from Osaka! I’d say. Let the good times roll.

November 19, 2006

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OSAKA, Japan—The queen city of the Kansai plain, Osaka—with its 8.7 million citizens (prefecture-wide)—is not a beautiful metropolis on the Tokyo scale, but it is an exciting, vibrant,
boisterous city where people enjoy life, food, and business. Here, everyone is on the go—the train and subway systems are user-friendly. Rain or shine (it’s rainy today), the underground teems with commuters. The hub of everything is the Osaka-eki, or simply Osaka station (not to be confused with the Shin-Osaka station where the Shinkansen bullet trains stop and go).

At Osaka station complex in Umeda, three train lines, i.e., the JR or Japan Rail, Hankyu and Hanshin lines converge to link up with the three main north-south subway lines. Naturally, the trains empty into the entrances of two great department stores—they’re called, what else? Depato in Nippon-go. The first is the Hanshin department store and the other, now a bit seedy is the grand Hankyu department store. These multistoried retail leviathans begin on train and subway level with a food section where you can buy any sort of hot meal and eat it, standing up, on the spot. Yeah, there’s a McDonald’s, too, inside the food section where Osakans can stoke up on those mega-calorie burgers and fries. (I saw a small boy consume a Big Mac, a bag of fries, chicken—then get a portion of Okonomiyaki from his papa). I never miss grabbing an Okonomiyaki, the kansai “omelette-pancake” whenever I happen to get to Osaka, Kobe or Kyoto. The name really means “cook what you like”—and you can do it yourself with a spatula to stir pieces of meat, seafood and vegetables into a cabbage and vegetable batter. But let the cook do it for you. Otherwise you’ll end up with smoke in your face and hair, smelling of smokey cabbage.

The Hanshin department store is awash in Santa Claus and Christmas chocolates and cookies. The store windows are festooned with cute little kids with wings in Santa costumes, and the cheery greeting, “Merry Christmas!” Every floor has white or evergreen Christmas trees, all alight, while X’mas peagants are portrayed at every corner. All bunting, balls, and wreathes of holly. Ho, Ho, Ho, the Osakans love Santa and the Christmas “sale” atmosphere. They think it’s cute, and the Japanese worship cuteness. Women announcers invariably affect cute little-girl voices, to carry this cute-adulation too far. But, by golly, why not?

Not to be outdone, next-door Hankyu depato has “Joyeux Noel” and French Christmas pictures all over the place. There are scenes of bateaux mouche on the Seine with Notre Dame and the Eiffel Tower in the background. Other paintings feature the Moulin Rouge, inevitably
over the jolly greeting, “Joyeaux Noël” Christmas has hit Osaka with a bang and a flourish. Jingle bells resound everywhere. Nobody thinks or talks about North Korea and the nuclear threat, or the missile problem.

In Japan, the first thing you’ll notice is that people are disciplined. They queue up patiently without question. They wait for the cashier to finish with the customer ahead without a frown, or any pushy aggression on their faces. Going up or down on escalators, they stand on the right side in single fashion, so they can leave the left side clear for anybody who needs to rush up on the left. When getting on trains, they begin queuing up once the melody sounds, announcing the impending arrival of the train they’re awaiting. On subway and train coaches nowadays, an announcement of the next stop in Japanese is usually followed by the same announcement in English (Eigo) so Gaijin and other foreigners can understand what’s going on. I say “Gaijin and others,” because “Gaijin” generally connotes Caucasian white foreigners, as in foreign devils.

There’s a flip side to all this discipline and courtesy stuff, as you’ll also discover when you begin to understand the Japanese. The Japanese are racist—especially since 99 percent of all who live in their islands belong to their race, the Yamato race. (Descended, legend goes, from the Sun Goddess Amaterasu Omikami). For instance, about all the Panchinko parlors—those ever-popular pinball games that ring night and day, at night in neon-bathed glory—are ethnic Koreans. Whether these are Koreans born and raised in Japan, either nisei (second generation) or sansei (third generation), the Japanese refer to Koreans in the derogatory tone, Chosun-jin. Many of the footsoldiers of the Yakuza, the criminal syndicates, are Chosun-jin and are referred to in slang as chimpira or “pricks.” They’re the guys with the occasional missing finger. The Oyabun or Bosses (Godfathers) never miss a finger, are attired in Savile-row type suits, and send their sons to Harvard, Princeton, and perhaps Oxford.

Cheery Osaka is the hometown of the most powerful Yakuza gangs, the Yamaguchi-gumi, which was founded in the 1920s. One guidebook says that the police estimates Yakuza members in 2,000 gangs are affiliated with Yakuza conglomerate groups. The Yakuza now has alliances and ties with Chinese triads, the Sicilian and US Mafiosi, drug cartels, and other racketeering syndicates abroad. They have accumulated immense wealth and allegedly funelled over $10 billion in legitimate investments in Europe and the United States.
The Yakuza’s origins, it’s said, really date back to the 1600s, when unemployed Samurai or ronin went about terrorizing local folk with their long katana or swords, and extorting tribute and other “favors” from them. Subsequently, the military rulers of Japan, the Shoguns hired some of them, called bakuto to do odd jobs, such as gambling with laborers so as to cheat them of their wages and give the Shoguns an extra cash windfall. It was these bakuto who initiated the sordid practice of finger cutting, called yubitsume as an act of penitence for error or an apology to the Boss. They also introduced tattooing. Many Yakuza gangsters contract hepatitis from this rampant tattooing all over their bodies, one doctor, who handled many such patients, confided to me.

I arrived in Kobe in January 1995, a week after a terrible earthquake had devastated that great port city (half an hour by train from Osaka) and the firestorm generated killed 6,000 persons. The Yakuza, quick to spot a public relations opportunity (and being charitable minded as is their custom) were the first on the scene of the disaster to underwrite medical aid. They established clinics in their local headquarters, and aid stations, passing out food, water, blankets and other relief supplies to the quake-hit population. Robin Hoods they were—just as on most other occasions they’re robbing hoods.

Other contradictions in Japanese society are seen with children. As I mentioned in yesterday’s column, Japanese kids appear to be the best-behaved in the world—a trait they obviously picked up from their parents. In contrast, however, in the schoolyard, some of them—girls, not only boys become bullies. Bullying is so prevalent that school boys and school girls frequently hang themselves, i.e. commit suicide in desperation and despair. Last Friday, two 14-year-old junior high school boys were found hanged in separate and apparent suicide cases in Fukuoka Prefecture, a city which is the final stop on the Shinkansen line.

In the same prefecture, a 10-year-old schoolgirl was victimized by some of her elementary school classmates who demanded 100,000 yen—the equivalent of about $1,000. In her desperation she also took her own life.

I believe a letter written to The Japan Times and published yesterday says it all. It was written from Honolulu by Harvey Hakoda, and the editors entitled it”Japanese Spirit has Emigrated.” Hakoda complained:
Although I am a third-generation Japanese American who has lived in Japan and traveled there more than 20 times, I cannot comprehend how bullying has become so institutionalized.

How can teachers sit and watch bullying take place without dragging the perpetrators to the principal’s office for suspension? I also don’t understand how Japanese teachers can teach a factual subject like history by distorting the events that took place in Asia in the first half of the twentieth century. It is also bewildering to see so many adults on commuter trains read comic books.” (Manga, he means).

Could the root of this affliction be related to the abundance of deviant motorcycle gangs among school dropouts? Finally, I am shocked to read that Japanese students of Korean ancestry are prohibited from competing in Japanese regional and national sports competitions. What is going on?

I submit that the Japanese who have emigrated to foreign countries carry on the true Japanese spirit and culture. Many of the departed could not tolerate Japanese militarism, women’s social bondage, the existence of Yakuza in Japanese society and other social deviations. The Japanese who remained in Japan have become overly restrained with un-Japanese social mores.

By golly, Harvey, you’ve put the question—where is the answer? Anyway, one happy contradiction is the fact that 98 percent of the Osakans are Buddhists, Shintoists, and even atheists—but they thoroughly enjoy “Merry Christmas.”

November 20, 2006

Kyoto is a world apart from Osaka. The former Imperial capital of 1,000 years, with a population of just 1.7 million, remains a spot for respectful pilgrimage—with Japanese flocking there to recapture the
essence of what used to be Japan. In short, it is where one gets back in touch with Yamatodamashii, and the traditions of the good old days.

At the Gion Corner where the Geishas are (Memoirs of a Geisha was filmed in part there), a traditional music theater offers the Kyomani, the Kyoto-style dance performed by gorgeously kimonoed ladies expressing everything with their flawless turns and pirouettes and their stylized, utterly graceful hand movements speaking to the audience of the old Japan.

There’s a tea ceremony, then some koto music keening about “The Moon over a ruined Castle” and that never-failing standby “Sakura” (Cherry Blossom). There’s a comic play with the three fellows probably inebriated by too much sothu or Santori whiskey to give their performance an air of realism; a tea ceremony, a flower arrangement, and that much-loved but boring Bunraku puppet play where a deranged lady in kimono scales the castle wall and bangs the bell to rouse the villagers with a false alarm. If that’s zen, then leave me out of it. The puppet, though, is cleverly manipulated in its lifelike movements by three black-hooded and garbed puppeteers. In Japanese plays, as in Chinese opera, if you’re dressed in black you’re regarded as completely “invisible” to the audience.

Things were livelier in our younger journalistic days when Kyoto was less modern; the narrow cobbled or graved streets were still there, and so were the traditional wooden town houses. The Geishas would do that marvelous dance with the fan, then play the koto with haunting effect, or fiddle the samisen (which they got from Korea). Then, in a tribute to those more raucous American occupation days, they would go into a snappy rendition of “Beisboru Gayumo” (Baseball Game), replete with “sotoriku!” (strike) and “aotu!” (out!). Another Geisha rendition was the “Tanko Bushi,” the Miners’ Song. Geishas, however—like most of Japan’s population—are growing old. They’re an average of 50 to 55 years old today. The young ones you see are Maikos—the student Geishas. Only three Geisha schools in Kyoto have remained dedicated to that traditional service of the floating world, which used to characterize Japan.

High school students from all over the country converge on Gion Corner on organized study-exursion tours, so they can discover that Japan is not just Play Station 3, or computers, or all that gadgetry in Akihabara—and rediscover their roots. Most of them do ho-hum and return to their gadgets, gimmicks, and “modern” ways.
In any event, I love Kyoto in any season. There, amidst the roar of automobiles, buses and trucks, one can still—on occasion—hear the sounds of old Japan. Only, however, if he listens well. There are more than 1600 Buddhist temples, over 400 Shinto shrines—and 17 UNESCO World Heritage sites in Kyoto. Kyoto, the book-writers say, is "the very stage on which Japanese history unfolded" and Kyoto "remains the heart and soul of Japan." (Chris Rowthorn said that well in the Lonely Planet volume on Kyoto).

It gave my heart to see the trees turning color—the autumn leaves flaming red on the maples, others flaring orange, golden yellow—a riot of shades which made you wonder whether you had fallen into some enchanted sleep and awakened to fairyland. The Imperial Palace remains elegant, though unoccupied. Bush and former Prime Minister Koizumi chopped there for dinner one evening, then chopped out again, no doubt after belting out a tune or two by Elvis Presley (Mr. K's favorite, next to his visits to the Yasukuni Shrine).

One of my favorites is still the Sanjusangen-do where you'll find standing 1001 statues of the Buddhist deity, Juichimen-senju-sengen Kanzeon, or the many-armed Kannon—a male equivalent, if I'm not mistaken, of the Chinese goddess of mercy, Kwan-Yin. God Kannon stands, too, on a lotus flower—and one huge Buddha deity figure dominates the other 1,000 (500 on each side)in the center. For me, the most impressive are the powerful and dynamic statues of the God of Thunder, ready to rain fierce thunderbolts on evil, and the God of the Winds, with his billowing bag, out of which he hurls typhoons, storms—and provokes tsunamis. People worshipped them as deities who controlled rain and wind, and brought about good harvests, or inflicted their fields and fishermen with calamity. The sculptures belong to the Kamakura period of the 12th to 14th centuries. Although I've visited this temple four times in previous visits, its fascination never pales.

The high point of any visit to Kyoto must be one of Kinkaku-ji/Rokuon-ji in northeast Kyoto. It remains one of the Imperial City's most breath-taking temples—a golden pavilion floating on a pond, surrounded by trees which in autumn are painted the colors of the rainbow. It's difficult to envision that this vision of ephemeral loveliness was burned down by an arsonist in the 1920s. The evil perpetrator was a deranged monk who went to jail for it—but died there of insanity in ten years. The Pavilion was rebuilt in such loving detail that nobody
guesses, unless told, that it is just a replica of the ancient structure constructed in 1482 by the shogun Ashikaga Yoshimasa as a genteel retreat from the turmoil of civil war. Its name really translates to “Silver Pavilion,” but it is painted and lacquered in gold—and, when the setting sun blesses it, burning through the mists of the mountain on whose slope it sits, or a pale moon leaves the temple with magic, one is transported to a kingdom which is hymned only in the storybooks. Magical Rokun-ji must be your main mission if you go to Kyoto.

Back to reality, unless you’re on a crowded bus tour, taxi fares are murderous since temples and shrines are scattered over a wide distance all over the area. The taxi flagdown is ¥550 here (about $4.50) but the poshier taxicabs, as in Osaka, have a flagdown of ¥660 (yep, US$6.60). Take the local bus, or subway—but this entails a great deal of walking. Unless you’re a marathon runner, be prepared to pay for transportation.

Kyoto is a city which can’t decide whether to uphold the old ways, or plunge into modernity. It’s already taken the plunge. Modern high-rises dominate downtown, particularly the neon-glaring, brightly-lighted main shopping boulevard of Shijo. The younger folk don’t relish freezing in the old town houses and prefer well-heated condominiums and apartments. Shoji glitters with the big department stores, the Takashimaya, Daimaru, Hankyu, Hanjin and even a huge Louis Vuitton shop (the Japanese adore L.V. even lining up to buy in the main HQ in Paris on the Champs Elysées). You name it. Every fashion outlet, beauty parlor, and emporium is there on Shoji.

The Kyoto railway station itself is a striking steel and glass structure of the futuristic type. Not having come to Kyoto for the past ten years (the last time I had attended a conference presided over by the Soviet Union’s past President Mikhail Gorbachev), I was shocked when our Japan Rail shuttle train pulled into the station, which was constructed in 1997. Way up to the fifteenth-floor observation level, and bustling with commuters going up and down on giant escalators from the seventh floor to ground level, Kyoto Station almost eclipses Grand Central in New York, but has fewer trains and commuters. It’s ridiculously easy to travel from Osaka to Kyoto. If you prefer speed (but pay double), you can take the shinkansen or bullet train from Shin-Osaka station, which gets you there in fifteen minutes. There are many other trains from Osaka station above Umeda, which get you there in thirty minutes.
One thing is evident. Osaka may be awash in Christmas bunting and Christmas carols—but neither Santa Claus nor X’mas has reached Kyoto and probably won’t. Kyoto remains serenely traditional in its spirit—Buddhist, Shintoist and Zen. No ho, ho, ho’s or flying reindeer sleds for them! There are, after all, in a population of 127 million—and ageing—less than half a million Christians in Japan. That’s the long and short of it.

November 22, 2006

The sun is shining bright here in Tokyo—and it’s a sort of “Indian summer” Tokyoites are experiencing—in contrast to the chill and scattered showers, and mist blowing down from the mountain the other day in the old Imperial capital of Kyoto. We came in smoothly aboard the swift Shinkansen, one of those legendary bullet trains, which whisked us to the capital from the Shin-Osaka station in just two hours and seventeen minutes. You’ve got to be on the platform on time, poised to throw your luggage aboard. The train stops, your designated coach (No. 14) literally in front of you, on the designated numbered slot. The doors slide open. You’ve got to step on board promptly, because the doors will shut in only a minute or two—then the train will be noiselessly rolling out of the terminal. There is no patawad or teka-teka. The “on time” record of the Shinkansen is impeccable. If you arrive at your train platform 45 seconds too late, you’ll see only the rear end of your departing 18-coach Shinkansen. Don’t weep. There’s another Shinkansen pulling into the station from Okayama headed for Tokyo about fifteen minutes later.

As it happened, we caught our train with a bit of huffing and puffing. We had miscalculated the time and the traffic, but, by golly, those taxi drivers would calmly get you there. If you’re prepared for the 100-meter dash, assisted by two young gentlemen from Philippine Airlines (the manager no less), you’ll get there ten seconds before the doors shut. Never again, you promise yourself. But once settled into your comfortable reserved seat, you can doze off, or read a book tranquilly. The “O-bento” girl comes along with her trolley and you can buy lunch—either a well-stocked Bento Box full of shrimp, sushi, rice,
pickles and other Japanese goodies, or a plastic sandwich pack (ham and cheese) or tuna. In her cart of comestibles, the young lady has everything you might desire, from mineral water, to Coca Cola, and Asahi or Sapporo beer, even hot cohi (coffee). Enjoy. Don’t forget, if it’s a clear day, to look on the left (hidari) side of the train, so you can see Mount Fuji with its crown of eternal snow.

The express makes about three stops, of a minute each, the last ones in Yokohama and Shinagara, and then you’re in immense, bustling Tokyo Station. Your bags fit neatly into a taxicab. If they’re oversized, the cabbie ties the trunk or boot down with a cord—he does this several times daily with a courteous polish. Those foolish Gaijin, he probably says in his mind. Why don’t they live out of a briefcase like sensible Japanese? The Japanese train and subway system, in every city, is superb. There are trains going everywhere, every five minutes. A catchy tune announces the impending arrival of your train or subway car, so you can queue up properly on the station platform. I repeat. They politely queue up for everything here – even in the 7-Eleven, or Lawsons, and other convenience stores, or the Mitsukoshi department store cashier.

Coming back to my subject, the 127 million Japanese are a nation on wheels. They zip everywhere on trains or by subway (in Tokyo, the latter are called Chikatetsu). If only we could establish an efficient train and Light Rail Transit system, we could move millions of commuters daily without hindrance of traffic. It’s time we began thinking of a subway system, too. Ugly green-painted “squatter” apartment buildings stand on top of the railroad right of way in Manila. We could have used that railroad-owned track now blocked by those eyesores to put in more trains, and have ourselves a credible urban rail system—thus cutting down Metro Manila’s traffic gridlock by 40 percent. These atrocities ruin our urban railroad service, for the benefit of a few measly squatters—who probably have sold their rights to those apartments to better-heeled people. Tear them down, I say, and get us a real railroad from Manila through Makati, and on to Angeles City for a new airport . . . Let’s get our country going—on rails, in the air, and by sea. And we’ll see a new dawn for our country, weighed down by traffic, inefficiency, bureaucratic corruption—and a sense of drift.

Japan should be one of our role models in this regard. This is a nation which built itself up completely from the ashes of World War II.
American bombers had virtually leveled Japan into smoking cinders and rubble—but they bowed, accepting their defeat (but obfuscating their history in their textbooks) and diligently got back to work. And now, they’re pulling out of the recession of 1995 to prosperity again. Even with an aging population, the Japanese are still on the go.

November 23, 2006

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