E-PAPER

Paris Syndrome: Reverse Homesickness?

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A strange illness called “Paris Syndrome” was recently identified in which Japanese tourists/expatriates in Paris develop a kind of exaggerated form of culture shock, requiring medical/psychological assistance and sometimes winding up repatriated. Apparently, the disillusionment that Japanese tourists experience upon arriving in Paris, stemming from the disappointment of their somewhat romanticized expectations, is enough to require in some cases medical assistance.

Although “Paris Syndrome” has been identified by Parisian psychiatrists as a recognizable illness, suffice it to say that it is still holds the status of a “novelty” disorder. There have been an average number of 20 to 100 cases per year (depending on the source) with varying degrees of urgency. Some have been identified as having mildly latent psychological predispositions that somehow become “triggered” by the change of scenery and circumstance provided by traveling. Others have been actually motivated by an existing psychological imbalance prior to making their voyage, either as an answer to a “calling” or an attempt to flee. Characteristic symptoms cover the gamut of disturbed psychotic behavior—schizophrenia, delirium, depression, etc.—but generally, admittance into the center follows any of a variety of “major behavioral problems”.

For all intensive purposes, the term “Paris syndrome” until now seems to serve as a catch-all phrase for the all those who end up in the Parisian hospital, Sainte-Anne, that “accommodates” them. In one article, the hospital is described in oddly touristic terms: its location is “central and near many places of interest” (Xaillé) and “France. . .is the only European country that offers [such] assistance to the Japanese in their own language.” (Viala, p.31) The ward in the hospital that treats the patients is hospitably referred to as the Psychiatric Center of Orientation and Reception (Xaillé). One could almost imagine a special entry in Japanese Paris travel guides for such service: ‘a very inviting and convenient place indeed for one to lose one’s mind (after having lost one’s way) .’

The term “psychiatric tourism” was coined by the British Medical Journal in 1995 for a crisis in a shortage of beds for mentally ill patients in London who originated from continental Europe and third-world countries and were taking advantage of the National Health Service’s (NHS) policy of treating visitors who had been detained under the Mental Health Act. The predicament instigated the issue of more narrowly defining those were entitled treatment, such as nonresident foreign nationals, particularly when it was noted that many foreign embassies did not want to get involved in such matters since they knew that the British NHS would “pick up the tab”. The report also referred to the fact that inner London was attracting “people from all over the world” and that “the need to seek anonymity in a metropolis has long been understood in relation to schizophrenic illnesses” (Tannock). The same could hold true for the Japanese in Paris.

The purpose of this investigation, however, is not necessarily to strictly define any new clinical psychological conditions. Rather, it is to use this somewhat young and therefore emergent phenomenon of "psychiatric tourism" as a recognition of a type of behavior that can be attributed to tourists/displaced individuals and what this behavior may signify towards a trend in the postmodern condition. Often, psychological disturbances can simply be an indication of sociological tendencies that as yet still have no other context or definition. A psychological diagnosis in this case merely serves as a convenient method of recording and classifying the subjects of this trend as case-studies-in-progress.

My original aim here was not necessarily to focus in on Paris in particular as a tourist destination or on the Japanese in particular as model tourists/travelers, although I will look a bit into the background of the Japanese in the west as a means of some initial groundwork. I think it is however safe to assume that Paris can be considered an immensely popular and iconic tourist destination and that the Japanese can be considered particularly sophisticated and avid tourists/travelers—one figure claims that there are approximately one million Japanese visitors to France per year (Viala, p.31). As of 2005, France has been cited as the world's top tourist destination, according to the World Tourism Organization.

Also, I would like to presume that the scenario of the Japanese in Paris is a fairly clear-cut example of significantly diverse cultures coming into contact, most significantly in terms of an Asian culture meeting a Western culture. I think it would also be fair to say that the situation of the Japanese in this instance could represent a particularly postmodern prevalent condition of voluntarily displaced individuals, be they tourists, migrants, expats, etc. This will inevitably be a starting point for the discovery of many cases of similarly uprooted spirits throughout the world.

In various accounts of the ailment, the affected Japanese are referred to in various ways: "tourists", "travellers", "visitors" "immigrants", etc. It is probably safe to assume that the majority are probably tourists who have decided to stay for a while. Hence, an examination of both touristic and migrant tendencies and motivations could both be referred to here. Indeed, the definitions of such terms are becoming more and more fluid as part of the postmodern condition. The desire to relocate or remain mobile in the search for an individual identity could be considered a frequent common denominator in contemporary life.

The Japanese have often been stereotypically designated as tourists. A simple explanation of this is the fact that they are easily identifiable, particularly in western/non-Asian locations such as Paris. A Korean-Canadian artist, Jin-me Yoon, based an entire work on her struggle with identity after being repeatedly identified as a Japanese tourist in her travels. While doing her research she was "disturbed by the chronic flattening of my identity, as the 'other', the ubiquitous 'Japanese tourist'". (Lippard, p.137). Lucy Lippard comments on the fact that the Japanese have assumed the position of the "quintessential tourists", superceding the Americans and the Germans. Although this could be perceived in merely a simplistic, derogatory light, i.e. the Japanese as the archetypal foreign tourists, this status could also be utilized as a starting point for an investigation into a reverse kind of "exoticism/Occidentalism", focusing more on their perspective rather than on their appearance as tourists, which could in turn, lead to a more universal definition of the tourist in general.

Because the ailment has only recently been identified and exposed, there are only a handful of sketchy case studies presented in reports on Paris syndrome. One case was apparently beckoned to Paris after viewing an advertisement in the Tokyo subway stating "France awaits you" and then subsequently believing that she will become the queen of a Scandinavian country (Xaillé). Another case was a student at the art school in Rheims who ended up holed up in a hotel near the Gare du Nord, maintaining virtually no contact with others (Viala, p.33). This scenario bears a striking resemblance to an autobiographical story, "And You, Too", by the well-known Japanese author, Shusaku Endo, whose work is known for its exploration of modern Japanese "encounters" with western culture. The story is one of three in his book, Foreign Studies (1965), which explores the theme of incompatibility between the east and the west.

In the story, a Japanese exchange student, Tanaka, undergoes the same ailments as Endo did during his time in Paris. Tanaka arrives in Paris, determined to set himself apart from the small Japanese contingent already there (comparing himself immediately even to his fellow Japanese travelers: "True to the stereotype of the Japanese traveler abroad with camera forever round his neck, these were the typical Japanese tourists" (Endo, p.54), but inevitably having to confront his identity as a fellow imposter in a strange land. What is notable in the story is that the Japanese who become ill (in this case, life-threateningly so, from tuberculosis), including Tanaka, seem to be resistant to being expatriated and ultimately regard the circumstance as a kind of failure, a trait that is also characteristic of the sufferers of Paris syndrome: "not wanting to give up their Paris dreams, the patients refuse to go back to Japan" (American Renaissance News).

In an attempt to provide loose, phenomenological explanations for sufferers of Paris syndrome, psychiatrists have attributed their patients' ailments to a "clinical depression" stemming from their inability "to reconcile their romanticism about Paris with reality" (ibid.). Tanaka undergoes a similar process upon his arrival into Paris. Upon initial disappointment ("The real Paris was still to come" (Endo, p.57), he becomes more encouraged as he enters Paris proper: "This was more like the Paris he had come to know through books, pictures and films whilst he was still in Japan"(ibid.).

But the definitive moment comes when he finally reaches his hotel after an exhausting, rainy night:

He was. . .aware that the man who now stood at his wit's end in the pouring rain on a Paris street-corner with heavy luggage in both hands, totally incapable of hailing a taxi, was not the university lecturer who had left Japan. The awareness of himself as an intellectual, which had helped him to sustain his self-respect. . .he now felt being peeled away and crashing to the ground (ibid., 58-9).

In his particularly worn-out state, the first sensation Tanaka experiences in the hotel lobby is the "strange smell of butter on the staircase1". At this point, upon encountering a fellow Japanese who has been lodging in the hotel for some time and

[1] My uncle, who was in the Korean Navy, once relayed to me a similar story when describing his first encounter with a Westerner. When he was assigned to share his bunk with a European sailor. When the sailor once commented that my uncle reeked of garlic (prodigiously used in *kimchee*, a Korean staple), my uncle exclaimed, "That's funny, you always reek of butter!".

after being invited into his room, which offers a distinctively familiar Japanese smell (a combination of wood and seaweed), Tanaka now experiences a profound sense of relief as he contemplates his newly gained perspective:

Whilst in Japan Tanaka had occasionally thought it strange that each of his fellow students who returned from a period of study abroad become so ardently nationalistic. . .One such person had argued that the Western spirit was more firmly rooted than its Japanese counterpart and had concluded that the Japanese way of thinking, unconcerned with cultural roots, was totally meaningless. . .Such ideas must follow from feelings like those I'm experiencing right now, he thought (ibid., 62).

Within his first evening, Tanaka goes through the full range of the displaced traveler's experience, the attempt to differentiate oneself, disappointment and fulfillment of expectations, heightened perception of strangeness, and finally, crisis of identity.

As a Christian scholar who studied and lived abroad, most notably in Paris, Endo documented that particular sense of alienation experienced by the difficult juxtaposition of east meeting west, becoming a pioneer in the postmodern unease of dislocated identity. After seeking some kind of identification with his Christian roots in France in the 1960s, Endo was confronted by the reality that his race did not corroborate his religion. (As a result, Endo himself became depressed and eventually contracted tuberculosis.) (Yancey) Although we may not be limited in this day and age to such rigid definitions based on religion, nation, or race, we are still, if not even more, proscribed by our relentless need to find an identity.

Identity seems to be the crucial factor in the difficult negotiation that takes place in our said traveler's journey. This brings us back to our original investigation: the motivation for travel/displacement. Tanaka's students speak of their discovery of the idea of "nationalism", the need to have a "firmly-rooted spirit", a decidedly Western concept of identity which can be applied to the individual as well. In commenting on the Paris syndrome, one Japanese psychologist commented on how the Japanese idea of collectivism clashed with the French/western value of individualism (American Renaissance News).

It is interesting here to provide some simple brief background on Japan's relation to the west in general (as opposed to other Asian cultures). Among the east Asian countries, Japan holds the unique position of being the most "westernized" of the east Asian countries (namely, China, Korea, and Japan). Although it also maintained, along with China and Korea, a policy of deliberately prolonged isolation from the western (and the rest of the) world throughout the 15th,16th, and 17th centuries, Japan was the first in its group to actively welcome and adopt western influences, in particular, Christianity, military strategies, and territorial expansion. This was in particular stark contrast to China, which, even after being forced to open its doors after signing the Nanking Treaty in 1842, felt no need to embrace or even show interest in western culture (Woodruff, p.82). Some may attribute this difference to China's ongoing belief in its superiority and self-sufficiency and/or to Japan's eagerness in "catching up with the rest of the world" (ibid., 86). As we all know now, the "rest of the world" is a relative term. In any case, Japan's legacy in the world dynamic may well have been determined by these differences, whether or not they may have served them positively or negatively.

Although Japan showed a brief period of receptivity to Christianity in the 16th century, fear of western imperialism eventually led to all Christians and signs of Christianity in Japan being banished or exterminated. By 1636, Japan firmly sealed its seclusion policy for the next two centuries (ibid.,22). The first story in Endo's Foreign Studies, "Araki Thomas", is an account of the first Japanese Catholic scholar to study theology in the west and who returns to a Japan in the process of eliminating Christianity. One of the key differences between the western and eastern religious views was the Christian idea of a Supreme Being, which conflicted with the Buddhist view of ancestor worship (Yancey). The struggle with the concept of individuality once again factors in here. The basic precepts of east Asian religions (Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism) are in fact diametrically opposed to such western Christian concepts of God, original sin, guilt, etc.: namely, family, conformity, humility (ibid.). These values have inevitably ingrained themselves into their respective cultures and are still valid today, even when not considered in a directly religious context.

The Japanese sociability is "based on membership" whereas "the Latin culture authorizes fluctuations of mood and attitude which can result in interference or intervention of interpersonal behavior" (Viala, p.31). Apparently, "the need to forcibly express oneself to be noticed—seen as vulgar in Japanese society—and exposure to a humour sometimes seen as offensive add to the unhappiness" (Xaillé). In a report on "behavioural differences" between the Japanese and Europeans on a website for expats, the Japanese are described as having difficulty "taking initiative" in comparison to Europeans, working in groups and making "committee-driven decisions" (Krentzel).

The rising popularity of examining the nature of tourism/migration has been attributed by Dean MacCannell to the identification of the tourist as a postmodern figure, who is by nature alienated, but who seeks subjectivity in his/her state of alienation, therefore engaged in a search for authenticity (MacCannell. p.xvi). Erik Cohen emphasizes that this depends on the tourist's "total world-view", and whether or not they adhere to a "centre", which may not necessarily be "geographically central to the life-space of the community of believers" (Cohen, p.180). What is more important to note is the individual's 'spiritual' (religious or cultural) centre, for which ultimate meanings are symbolized by the individual (ibid.,181).

As we have noted, the Japanese have traveled to Paris often due to a romanticism or idealization as a cultural symbol, as well as out of apparent religious motives, as was the case with Endo. One Paris syndrome patient claimed that she had heard the voice of the Virgin Mary in Tokyo begging her to come to the front of a Paris church (Xaillé). It is most likely that these motives are all combined in a complex fashion, depending on the individual. An article on Japanese expats in New York reported on how young Japanese felt they had more freedom of expression and individuality in New York (Prasso). One Japanese expat who arrived early in the movement spoke of her "powerful need for release" and describing Japanese culture as "as restrictive as a Taliban harem". (Brookhiser).

As of 2006, New York can claim the largest population of Japanese living outside of Japan: 59,295, not including the unregistered among the 475,000 Japanese tourists of that year who stay unofficially. Staying from anywhere between three months to three years, these "freeters" ("free" plus "arbeiter", German for "worker") are mostly

young, many female, who have come to New York to “find themselves”, “express themselves”, where they “they don’t get any pressure” and find “freedom”. A Japanese film called Bashing features a young woman who returns to Japan after volunteering in and then being taken hostage and released in Iraq to face shame and ostracization in her hometown for her non-conformist actions. She claims that she felt more alive and welcome and needed in the war-torn country than she ever did in Japan and ends up returning to Iraq in the end.

There are even several guidebooks that have been put out in Tokyo bookshops for the New York freeters, some positive (“Finding Yourself in New York”, “The ‘I Love New York’ Book of Dreams”), some negative (“Even If You Live in New York, You Won’t be Happy”). Most likely, comparable guidebooks for Paris fall more often under the second category. Whether there is a “New York syndrome” has yet to be determined, but New York, perhaps the most diversely integrated city in the world, can probably be considered more of a haven for those who would like to pave their own way and search for a unique individuality than Paris. Another article refers to the Japanese expats in New York as “temporary emigres”, emphasizing New York’s unsatiable openness to everything new and different, including Japanese cuisine and pop culture.

In Endo’s story, “And You, Too”, Tanaka witnesses the defeat and return of his tuberculosis-stricken colleague, Sakisaka, before experiencing the same fate. Sakisaka describes the difficulty of ascribing one’s centre in an entirely different culture from one’s own:

Here we are trying to drink in the culture of this place which has been more than two thousand years in the making—all in the space of one or two years. Every day, though, fully aware of the impossibility of the task, we tense ourselves like a taut bowstring for fear of missing or overlooking even the smallest detail of that culture. . .my sickness represents a painful defeat in my struggle to come to grips with this country (Endo, p. 114).

In a poetic demonstration of this unfathomable gap, Sakisaka, an architecture student, in his last days before returning to Japan, shows Tanaka one of his favorite museums, exhibiting in chronological order replicas of religious sculptures from cathedrals throughout France. It is here that Sakisaka reveals the symbolic origin of his illness: his incapacity of truly containing “the great flow of European history”(ibid., 119):

. . . during the two years I have spent here walking among those stone streets under the dark Paris sky, I have begun to realize for myself that I am part of a long tradition of art and artists. That realization is very different from the time when I was still in Japan studying from books and photographs. I was hoping if possible to spend the next ten, even twenty, years experiencing for myself that momentary artistic reality. . .But now I am broken by this disease and have to return home (ibid.).

Cohen concedes, like MacCannell, that “many moderns are alienated from their society” (Cohen, p.181). One of the ‘spiritual’ centres that they may seek, being aware that they have lost their own irretrievably, can presumably be located by “vicariously experiencing the authentic participation in the centre of others” (ibid.).

MacCannell stresses the point that the tourist can be considered a modern “pilgrim” who goes on a “quest for the mythical land of pristine existence” (ibid. 182) This could apply in the conventional sense to the plight of the sufferer of “Jerusalem syndrome”, the closest comparable illness to Paris syndrome, in which tourists to

Jerusalem experience similar symptoms of “psychotic decompensation” (Yair, p.86). In this case, the religious pilgrimage associations are self-evident, Jerusalem representing the ‘centre’ of the Jewish and Christian ‘world’ (Cohen, p.182).

In the case of Paris syndrome, however, the limitations of MacCannell’s pilgrimage theory, as pointed out by Cohen, are noteworthy: “the problem of the cognitive structure of the tourist’s ‘world’, in contrast to that of the pilgrim” (ibid., 183). In order to delineate the possibilities in addressing this issue, Cohen postulates five different modes of touristic experiences, of which the “experiential” and the “existential” seem to come the closest to the plight of those who are subject to Paris syndrome.

The experiential tourist is characterized by the fact that he remains aware of his ‘otherness’ even after observing the authentic life of others. He may learn to appreciate this observed life aesthetically, but it does not provide a new meaning or guidance to his life (ibid., 188). Those who refuse to leave Paris may be classified as “existential tourists”, who are “fully committed to an ‘elective’ spiritual centre, i.e. one external to the mainstream of his native society and culture” (ibid., 190). In the case of Endo and his representative characters, their pilgrimages could be considered both religious and cultural, but in the case of the Paris syndrom-ees, theirs could be considered only cultural, depending on their religious background, which brings us back to Cohen’s original point: that “in the complexities of the modern world, the ‘world’ of any given culture and society is not clearly bounded; the cultural inheritance of one society is often appropriated by, and made part of other cultures” (ibid., 191).

If the Paris syndrome victims’ resistance to leaving can be construed as an indication that a return home will not resolve their inherent sense of alienation, they would directly demonstrate the central hypothesis of Cohen’s work, “that a person seeks and ultimately adheres to ‘spiritual’ centres of others only after he realizes the discomfort of his alienation to the centre of his own culture and society” (ibid., 193). The difficulty that such a subject may experience, and what may be the cause of a psychological imbalance, is the possibility of a “false consciousness” on the part of the experiential tourist who falls victim to a “touristic illusion” (ibid., 195):

> The centre, of course, symbolizes an ideal. Ideals are not fully realizable, but can only be reached asymptotically. . .[The existential tourist] will thus encounter a discrepancy between the ideal conception and actual life, which, if not dealt with satisfactorily may provoke a personal crisis of meaninglessness, futility and disenchantment (ibid., 195-6).

One of the more esoteric symptoms of Paris syndrome victims has been described as follows: “states of major anguish, often in relation to a state of strangeness, derealisation, depersonalization, even of dissociation” (Viala, p.32).

The Japanese in Paris apparently cannot come to terms with “the reality of unfriendly locals and scruffy streets”, especially when the values that they “hold dear are trust, politeness, and congeniality”(Mick). Politeness is apparently the “key to Japanese culture, and this includes never saying no directly to anyone, apologising often and keeping disagreements and quarrels to a minimum” (Krentzel). The question is whether the French have attempted to “adapt” their behavior accordingly—aside from providing psychological services for disturbances resulting from this behavior. The French supposedly launched a campaign in 2005 to promote “politesse” after “having

witnessed in the last few years the degradation of civility and manners" (Sciolino). Whether this was for the benefit of tourists or natives, though, is debatable.
The investigation of sources and origins of tension are somewhat cursory to Cohen's central point, which best demonstrates the quandary of the Paris syndrome and the postmodern condition: the postulation that the tension is part of the ultimate and unavoidable state of the contemporary existential tourist/migrant/displaced person. In this case, MacCannell can also weigh in: the existential tourist indeed, in the tradition of Sartre and Camus, cannot "penetrate the other's authenticity" or find an exit from the inherent loss-of-centre of human existence (Cohen, p.195).

In the case of the seemingly irreconcilable gap between east and west, this condition takes on an added dimension. When Endo's Tanaka eventually contracts tuberculosis himself, he receives a letter from Sakisaka, who has been back in Japan for some time:
On occasion, I tried to convince myself that that [European] flow and the Japanese flow were fundamentally the same. . .(Endo, p.225)
He goes on to compare several of the French religious statues to analogous Asian works and concludes that the incommensurability of the two cultures cannot be resolved:
When I was depressed, I would visualize these expressions of the similarities between East and West and attempt to convince myself that that great lava flow did not actually exist. . .But ultimately all I learnt . . .was the insuperable distance between the cathedral at Chartres and the Horyjuri temple. . .From the outside they may appear similar, but the blood of those who created them was very different. I spent two years living with this uncomfortable realization. People will no doubt ask me if that is all I learnt. But there is a great difference between acquiring knowledge from a book and learning it experientially. At any rate, that is all I gained during my period of study in France.
We cannot receive blood from those of a different blood group. That is what I thought about on those lonely winter evenings in Paris. . .(ibid.)

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