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LETTER FROM ASIA; Japan and China: National Character Writ Large

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Of all languages in the world, Japanese is the only one that has an entirely different set of written characters to express foreign words and names. Just seeing these characters automatically tells the Japanese that they are dealing with something or someone non-Japanese.

So foreign names, from George Bush to Saddam Hussein, are depicted in these characters, called katakana. What's more, the names of foreign citizens of Japanese ancestry are also written in this set of characters, indicating that while they may have Japanese names, they are not, well, really Japanese.

By contrast, in Chinese, no such distinction is made. There, non-Chinese names are depicted, sometimes with great difficulty, entirely in Chinese characters. Foreigners are, in effect, made Chinese.

At bottom, the differences reflect each country's diverging worldview. In contrast to the inner-looking island nation of Japan, China has traditionally viewed itself as the Middle Kingdom of its name, the center of the world. If it is natural for Japan to identify things or people as foreign, viewing them with some degree of caution, it may be equally natural for China to take "Coca-Cola" or "George Bush," and find the most suitable Chinese characters to express them.

In Japan, the rigid division between the inside and outside in the language underscores this country's enduring ambivalence toward the non-Japanese. The contrast with China is stark, and speaks also to the future prospects of Asia's two economic giants as they compete for influence in a world of increasingly fluid borders.

While today's Japanese travel overseas with an ease and confidence that would have been unimaginable only two generations ago, they remain uneasy about foreign things and people coming here. Safer to label them clearly as foreign.

Not so China.

"China is a big continent and has an inclination to think that it is No. 1 and that others are uncivilized," said Minoru Shibata, a researcher at NHK, Japan's public broadcast network. "Therefore, they feel that giving Chinese names to foreigners is doing them a favor."

China and Japan represent the two nations that still widely use Chinese characters in their writing. The Chinese, as the creators of this system, still use them exclusively.

Come to Japan, and things get extremely complicated. In their everyday lives, the Japanese use three different sets of characters in writing -- four if the widely used Roman alphabet is also included.

First are the Chinese characters, called kanji here. Japanese names are written in kanji. Currently, the number of kanji permitted for names stands at 2,230, and selecting a character outside this list is illegal. Parents have been pressing for an expanded list, though, and so the justice ministry said recently that it is considering adding between 500 and 1,000 characters.

Second is a set of phonetic characters used for Japanese words. Third are the katakana, the set of phonetic characters for foreign words.

"There is no other language that has three sets of characters -- only Japanese," said Muturo Kai, president of the National Institute for Japanese Language.

In the United States, parents' freedom to name their children may be absolute. Here the government and the media set the boundaries of names and the way they are written, thereby also setting the boundaries of Japanese identity.

In the media, the names of George Bush and Saddam Hussein are written in the characters reserved for foreign names. But so are the names of people of Japanese ancestry, like Alberto Fujimori, Peru's deposed president, or Kazuo Ishiguro, the author of "Remains of the Day," who left Japan at the age of 5 and is a British citizen. Their names could be written in kanji, but are instead written in katakana, in an established custom indicating that they are not truly Japanese.

The distinctions are sometimes difficult to draw, as they touch upon the difficult question of who is Japanese, or, rather, when does someone stop being Japanese. If Mr. Ishiguro had kept his Japanese citizenship all these years, would his name be written differently here? Why is the name of Mr. Fujimori, who holds Japanese citizenship and now lives in exile here, not written in kanji like the names of other Japanese? The media have no set criteria.

Are the criteria citizenship, blood, mastery of the Japanese language or customs? Or, in this island nation where leaving Japan has always meant leaving the village, does one start becoming non-Japanese the minute one steps off Japanese soil?

There is a strong argument to be made for that. Children of Japanese business families stationed overseas for a few years invariably encounter problems returning here. Schoolmates often pick on them and call them *gaijin*, meaning foreigner or outsider. That problem has decreased in recent years, as more and more Japanese have spent time abroad. But those children are still considered to have suffered from their years overseas, in contrast to, say, an American child whose experience living abroad would usually be considered a plus.

Chinese identity is a different matter. Whether you are a fourth-generation Chinese-American student at Berkeley, or the children of Chinese operating a restaurant in Lagos, Nigeria, you are considered Chinese, or an insider, upon returning to China. Your name will be written in the same way as everybody else's. Unlike Japan's, Chinese identity transcends borders.

"Chinese people have a strong feeling of comradeship toward overseas Chinese," said Naokazu Hiruma, who is in charge of language use at the daily *Asahi Shimbun* and studied in China. "Overseas Chinese have a long tradition, and they remain Chinese even after generations have passed. Japanese regard second- or third-generation overseas Japanese, even though they are of Japanese origin, as 'people from that country over there.' "