



VIET-CHI POST No 23

ABOVE THE OCEAN

Series of letters from Master Phan-Hoang

Trời dài đất rộng, đi thật, sống thật, ghi vội, gửi về...

Cánh Thư Phan-Hoàng

ĐẦU SÓNG NGỌN GIÓ

Lá Thư Số 11: Đi Kamakura

Letter 11:

GOING TO KAMAKURA

(DRAFT)

(continued from Letter 10)

I missed the New Year's Eve Celebration, 2009, at the famous Enoshima Shrine. Fortunately in Japan the new year celebrations last three days and I decided to take this opportunity to explore the area of Kamakura.



By road, this old city is located only about 50 km south-west of Tokyo but by train I do say that visitors would easily need two or three hours to get there if they did not make any mistake in taking the correct train, changing the train line at precise place, since trains

and subway system in Tokyo are operated by different companies and the networks of rail lines is huge; surely the most complicate in the world. Adding to this, tickets are to be bought at automatic machines, and I can tell you that this is a real challenge for foreigners, even for some Japanese. Happily we are not in New York City, nor Paris or Hong-Kong, but in a place where people are very patient and helpful. To me the simplest way to get to Kamakura is using the Odakyu Line to go to the city of Fujisawa and from there change to Enoden Line which departs from Fujisawa and ends at Kamakura. The train is picturesque. Its goes slowly through hills, narrow streets, fields, then at some moment shows wide ocean scenery before disappearing without notice in a surprisingly small old town. There it waits. Patiently, like a lover waiting for his new girlfriend to arrive. Everyone inside the train keep silent until the moment the other train noisily enters the station blowing its horn in a long and high pitch. Fourteen stops mark the trail





from Fujisawa to Kamakura. At each station there is always something interesting to visit. The famous Great Buddha, thirteen meters of height, is located in the site of Kotokuin temple, near the Hase station, the eleventh stop from Fujisawa, while the largest shrine, the Tsurugaoka Hachimangu, stands majestically about one kilometre away from the last station at down town of Kamakura. Before getting in this train to Kamakura I did not know what to visit first. There are so many interesting places to visit around here since Kamakura is an important place in the history of Japan. It was, in the 12th century, the headquarters of the Shogunate, and with 200,000 people this city was the 4th largest city in the world. Today Kamakura is a small city but the surrounding area has many beautiful Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples. Visiting all of them would require several full days, even a month. Twenty six years ago, in 1983, I have been visiting this place and now I am back. Is there now some specific reason to spend several days here? I cannot answer because I really don't know. Maybe I can say, that is the way I am when I am traveling: *Just go, live the moment, learn everything, and expect uncertainty.*

Early morning of the first day, when I get out of the Odakyu Line station in Fujisawa, I do not go immediately to the Enoden train for Kamakura. Although I already know Fujisawa quite well, I want to stay here, for a few moments in early morning, to feel the dynamic atmosphere of this city when people all run to one direction, the direction of the trains to Tokyo.

Men wear clothes almost in the same style, the classical one: dark suit, white shirt and "boring" tie. Women too, very classic. Most women have shoes with high heel

that make a specific noise when they run. These sounds amuse me because it brings me back to the atmosphere of a certain Europe I had known a long time ago, to Vietnam a more long time ago, and to Belarus just two years ago. Suddenly I smile, thinking of the morning atmosphere in Washington D.C. Many women in this American capital also wear in classical style, because they work for the government or with prestigious corporations. But the difference is in early morning, they walk fast as hell with their ... jogging shoes! Fancy shoes are kept in their bag for use at office.



Above the train station, a giant department stores, the Lumine, stands right up in a tall building with bright color, facing proudly its competitor, the Odakyu in darker color. Inside, both are modern, very clean, and one can find almost everything from computers, shoes, to sushi. In the Lumine, on the second floor, there is a Starbucks Coffee while inside the Odakyu, at one entrance, one can find a French sign that shows "Café Comme Ça". This is a much more quiet and elegant coffee shop. However, just its name is French; the coffee they serve here is Americano, a good one. I have tasted it a few days ago. When I



looked around in some coffee shops I noticed that the “*expresso*” too, no matter French or Italian, exists in Japan; but it is not much popular with Japanese people. Nowadays, tea is clearly losing ground among “digital native people” and I would say also among “digital immigrant people”. They sip American style coffee while surfing their web. Don’t blame new technology, better understand it and its enormous influence in the life of people. Don’t complain why more and more people now learn English rather than the once influential French. In the same token, today economic recession is happening, it is there, in Japan and elsewhere. There are those who complain against it and those who try to understand the why and the how in order to better face it . When I left the coffee shop to take my train for Kamakura I crossed a flow of young people heading toward the opposite direction. They look neat and joyful. Despite the cold of winter, many girls wear shorts and tall boots. Seems that is the current fashion. I did not see many kimonos in the streets. Japan is a country of contradiction and contradiction makes Japan unique. Don’t try to understand why some of these so polite, so respectable people can sometimes urinate in the street. Why most of them can be Shintoists and Buddhists at the same time and despite of their deep respect for Japanese tradition, nowadays an increasing number of young couples celebrate, at high cost, their wedding in Christian ceremony, still they are absolutely not Christian at all. These unbelievable facts make me believe that the strength of Japan lays in the capacity of its people to do what others do not believe they can do. The current economic recession will be a hard test of creativity to all people in different countries. We will soon know the results of this global competition. I anticipate a number of Japanese corporations will fall while other Japanese companies will rise in the same time. This phenomenon could happen in many others countries, but in a quite different manner.

Arriving at Kamakura I failed to have an accident that could bear serious consequence to me: excited at the view of a mass of humans, in some distance, flowing orderly in one direction like a giant snake moving in a jungle, I forgot that in Japan people are driving left side, so I did not see a car was fast coming when I tried to cross the street looking at the wrong side! But the emotion passed quickly and then after I tried my best to chase the giant snake. It is now getting slowly into a narrow street, under an impressive Japanese gate painted in red. So I follow it. The old street is full of people , a million of Japanese is going in the same direction: the direction to the famous shrine, the Tsurugaoka Hachimangu. I thought it is not healthy to follow so long the crowd. So at the first cross section I escaped and then it happened that I got lost. Sometimes, it is good to get lost! You get to walk more miles when you get lost, the emotion of fear or of excitement is higher at each new discovery you encounter. The daunting uncertainty helps shaping your instinct and discernment. Finally, after two hours walking in all directions, I reach the aimed shrine. A bit tired but much happier than following the crowd. The immense shrine now appears in front of me, on top of a small hill. I feel life is intensely beautiful. Yes, I am now visiting this sacred place, but the process of my visit does not start

only when I arrive here a few minutes ago, it starts when I decided to put my feet out in the street this early morning. The way to go is more important than the place to reach.

(to be continued at Letter 12)

Charles Phan-Hoang, January 2009.

