

q&a

CHIP ECKTON

COLUMNIST AT
OUTSIDERVOICE.COM

A CERTIFIED NURSING ASSISTANT AND FORMER ESL teacher, Chip Eckton is the New York writer behind the popular advice column of popular Japanese website outsidervoice.com.

HOW DID YOUR WEBSITE BEGIN? The website was the brainchild of Seiji Yamasaki, who administers the site. He and I have been friends for a long time now—at least 15 years. We knew each other in New York and have kept in regular contact since he moved back to Japan. He had the idea of starting up a different kind of T-shirt site or a webzine about two-and-a-half years ago, which developed into outsidervoice.com. **YOU SEEM TO CONNECT TO A LOT OF JAPANESE PEOPLE, EVEN WHEN YOU ARE NOT PHYSICALLY IN THE COUNTRY ITSELF.**

I think the fact that I'm not Japanese frees the individuals who write to me to open up a bit more. One thing I have noticed from the letters I've received is how much more frequently Japanese people consider suicide as a way to solve the problems they are facing. Some of the writers also seem to have an unwarranted sense of cultural inferiority. Of course, there are plenty of Japanese who have a sense of cultural superiority as well, but they haven't written to me (yet). **WHY DO YOU THINK SO MANY**

JAPANESE PEOPLE LOOK TOWARDS YOU FOR ADVICE? I don't know any of the people

who write to me, so I have no personal agenda where they're concerned. Most importantly, though, is that I am an outsider to them. The name of the site is Outsider Voice and to those who write to me, given my personal background and who I am, I am an outsider and am therefore impartial. **WHAT ARE SOME OF THE MOST MEMORABLE**

QUESTIONS YOU HAVE GOTTEN? One

writer asked about the perception of Japan, and Japanese rock music in particular, in the West. While the questions about sexual problems are, unsurprisingly, big draws with those who read the column online, the column about Japanese rock music has drawn more attention than any other. The columns dealing with my opinion of drug use and terrorism were also very interesting for me to write, and have drawn some attention from those who disapprove of my viewpoint. **WHAT DO YOU HOPE TO ACCOMPLISH WITH YOUR WEBSITE?** I hope that anyone who chooses to write to me will find my advice helpful. There's more to the site than just my column, though. Yamasaki-san's online diary is quite interesting, and there are some artists featured on the site whose work is deserving of attention. We also have some episodes on there of a video project that Yamasaki-san and I worked on together some time ago. Not to mention the T-shirts, which are of high quality and unique to the site. I hope that the site will continue to grow in popularity and everyone involved will gain some greater recognition for their work. www.outsidervoice.com



star struck

STRENGTH OF WILL

WILL SMITH LEAVES SCI-FI BEHIND FOR SOME SERIOUS DRAMA IN *THE PURSUIT OF HAPPYNESS*

BY CHRIS BETROS

THE LAST FEW TIMES WILL SMITH HAS BEEN TO

Japan, he talked a lot about aliens and robots. "Now I get a chance to talk about something audiences can feel a connection to," the 38-year-old star said of his latest film, *The Pursuit of Happyness*, which he calls his best performance to date, and for which he has been nominated for a best actor Oscar. Based on a true rags-to-riches story, *Pursuit* is about the life of Chris Gardner (Smith), an unemployed single father. Broke and living with his son in shelters, Gardner fights against all odds to become a successful stock broker.

In promoting the film, Smith at times sounds more like a philosopher. "The story is something we can all relate to—the desire to attain happiness. It's about the power of the human spirit and faith in an idea. We come into the world with great hope that everything will be sweet and wonderful. At some point, we realize that isn't true. There are bad people and bad things do happen to good people, and we are not as safe as we would like to be. I believe we are all on

a journey to discover how to deal with the realities of the world, and one of the most powerful tools we have to survive that journey is hope. That idea or dream you have in your head is the little piece of control you have in the universe."

Smith said he was amazed when he met Gardner. "The first thing I noticed was how peaceful he was. He had that look in his eye of someone who had gone through an awful experience and come out on the other side with power. I've only seen that look twice before: in Muhammad Ali and Nelson Mandela. We had similarities, though. We both believe that ideas can become reality if you don't give up."

In an unusual casting move, Smith's 8-year-old son Jaden plays Gardner's boy. "It added a special element to the film," said Smith. "My wife Jada was concerned at first. She said that on the set I should treat him as a co-star, not as my son. It worked out really well."

Smith credits his own family for everything he's got. "The most valuable element is commitment," he said. "We support one another, no matter what. Divorce will never be an option. If you allow it to be an option, you will choose it one day when things aren't going well. Everyone gets to that point where you feel you can't spend another day with your wife or husband."

As for how he defines happiness (no one seems to know why it is spelled "happyness" in the film's title), Smith said it's all about self-esteem. "If you could step out of your body for a day and follow yourself around, would you really admire that person? Would you love to hang out with him? If you were a member of the opposite sex, would you like to have sex with yourself?" Smith quipped, posing a challenge to his interpreter.

Smith's visit to Japan wasn't all serious talk. He dropped in on the set of the TV variety show *Smag x Smag* and visited Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, recommending that the PM take plenty of tissues if he sees the film. "But I don't know whether it would be good for people to see the Prime Minister crying in public." ☺

