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Front Page Edit Page Other Page *ad*

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CIA Pressure Unnecessary?

Mistranslation a Fine Art in Japan

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Los Angeles Times-Washington Post Service

TOKYO — Anyone who has been in Japan more than 24 hours knows that it's a rare Japanese interpreter who needs pressure of any kind to totally destroy the meaning of any statement originating in English.

So foreigners here are holding their sides in mirth over reports that the CIA sent an agent to Japan to insure that an interpreter screened the comments of folk singer Joan Baez.

It hardly seems likely the CIA exerted itself along those lines, because ever since Commodore Matthew Perry opened Japan to the West, foreigners have been cursing interpreters here.

In the case of Miss Baez, Ichiro Takasaki, a producer for the Nippon Broadcasting Co., was pressed into service as translator during her Japanese tour last month.

His translation was something less than accurate.

In one mistranslation, shown on television, Miss Baez said she refused to pay taxes because she did not want her money to help finance the Vietnam war. Takasaki translated this as: "Taxes are high in the United States."

Later, he told Japanese newspapers that a mysterious "Mr. Cooper of the American Embassy" threatened to refuse him entry into the United States unless he muted the singer's political observations.

Subsequently, Takasaki modified this to say only that suggestions were made to which he agreed—no threats.

The U.S. embassy said it had no "Mr. Cooper" on its staff, and denied that any U.S. employe had attempted to act in the way Takasaki alleged.

I was at the Koseinenkin Theater for the third of Miss Baez's appearances in Tokyo. By this time, Takasaki should

have adjusted to her perhaps difficult speech patterns.

At one point, a member of the audience ran forward between numbers and tossed a bouquet onto the stage. After that, the following dialogue ensued:

Joan (in English): Japan is full of surprises. Tell them Japan is full of surprises.

Takasaki (in Japanese to the audience): Thank you very much.

Joan (to Takasaki): Even I could tell you didn't translate that. Tell them Japan is full of surprises.

Takasaki (again in Japanese to the audience, now beginning to laugh because, being largely the young, they understood the singer the first time): Thank you very, very much.

Nobody in the audience suspected the long arm of the CIA in that exchange. And there were enough others like it to make the evening seem simply like a normal one where interpreters enter into entertainment or anything else in Japan.

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