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## Reviews of Books

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Roger J. Davies & Osamu Ikeno (Eds.), *The Japanese Mind: Understanding Contemporary Japanese Culture*. Tokyo: Tuttle Publishing, 2002. 270p. ISBN 0-8048-3295-1. \$14.95.

If the prospect of trying to understand the Japanese mind has befuddled you as much as the often quoted but never answered Zen *koan*, "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" (Answer: listening), then perhaps this book is for you. Presented as a college level textbook which aims to demystify and explore within a contemporary framework the historical and cultural roots of the Japanese people(s), this compilation of essays is a welcome addition to the innumerable tomes already available on the island race known as the *Yamato*. The source of these essays has everything to do with the success of the book. Unlike most books written with the intention of shedding light on the Japanese mind, these essays were written by Japanese university students in an attempt to explain their culture to others and understand themselves better in the process. The cathartic byproduct is an easy, earthy read.

Each chapter of the book focuses on a specific aspect or key concept of Japanese culture. The concepts are presented in alphabetical order (the western *romaji* alphabet, that is), and each chapter begins with a general definition of the term being covered. As the book's title suggests, the contemporary relevance of these ideas is explored in addition to whatever initial social and political factors may have existed at the time these concepts became accepted by and characteristic of the Japanese. The ideas are also compared with their western complements, when such complements exist, and the general feel of the book is of a sincere and forthright attempt to increase understanding and communication in areas where misunderstanding and miscommunication often occur, whether between student and teacher, lover and beloved, or in the corporate boardroom. The authors have also provided a list of discussion questions and cross-cultural issues for further exploration at the end of each chapter. A glossary of terms used but not covered in full chapter format is handily placed at the back of the book, and a comprehensive bibliography, broken down by chapter, provides the inquisitive reader the necessary references to further research any of the over twenty-five subjects covered in detail. For the sake of brevity, let's look at how the authors deal with three separate but interrelated terms: *chinmoku*, silence in Japanese communication; *haragei*, an implicit way of communicating in Japan; and *uchi to soto*, dual meanings in Japanese human relations.

Unlike the often undue importance placed on sound in daily communication between non-Japanese people, silence in communication, or *chinmoku*, is seen by Japanese as "a communicative skill, not just a form of emptiness between spoken words" (p. 51). Both a historical factor, Zen Buddhism, and the prevalence of group consciousness in daily life are cited as motivators for the sometimes deafening absence of sound existent in so many Japanese (non)speech acts. As Zen places special importance on the attainment of truth not through the Socratic method of question and discussion, but rather on an ability to endure the known, maybe known, and unknown through silence, communication in Japan evolved with the incorporation of silence as a central tenet. Of equal importance in

understanding the role of silence in Japanese communication is the emphasis Japanese place on group consciousness. Silence is not necessarily viewed as an inability or unwillingness on the part of someone to express themselves, but also "functions as a kind of lubricating oil to create smoother communication...and contributes to a peaceful and harmonious atmosphere" (p. 54). However, the authors rightly point out that the tool of silence cuts both ways; defiance and indifference are also expressed through silence in Japan. For non-Japanese, distinguishing between these polar manifestations of the same communicative tool can be a daunting task, especially for those of us reliant on banter-as-bridge. Cross-cultural misunderstandings that may occur as a result of the role of *chinmoku* in Japanese communication are explored at the end of the chapter, and readers are provided with a few insightful notions (explicitly detailed) on how to better understand the suggestability of this notion.

Anatomically centered and presented a little less than halfway through the book, the concept of *haragei*, or "belly art", also involves a less than direct way of communicating in Japan. *Haragei* manifests in Japanese culture in a variety of situations, but is most readily used as a means of influencing others, either verbally or through physical action, and often takes the form of dealing with people in a ritualistic manner. As in most chapters, *haragei* is explored and defined within the context of other intradependent features of the Japanese mind. The authors have gone to great lengths to show how one concept of the Japanese mind cannot be viewed independently; to understand *haragei*, the concepts of *amae*, *honne* and *tatema*, and *ishin denshin* are also introduced and explained. As one reads this book, the web of interplays between ideas in the Japanese mind becomes increasingly complex. It is the well-crafted discussion activities and detailed glossary that enable readers, and hopefully students in classrooms wherein this book could be used, to draw the necessarily fine delineations between such intricately related terms and concepts.

*Uchi to soto*, the inside and the outside, what I am a part of and what I am not a part of, is certainly one of the most pervasive cultural traits of the Japanese mind. For Japanese, this distinction is perhaps second in line only to the attention paid to social hierarchy when interacting with others. The difficulty for non-Japanese in grasping *uchi to soto* comes not so much in being unable to understand the concept, but rather in the face of everyday application; no matter how *uchi* you might be within certain predetermined circles, as a non-Japanese you are always *soto*. Again to the authors' credit, both the benefits and the drawbacks of this concept are explored. The disharmony created in an attempt to preserve a sense of "us" is looked at in light of both the *burakumin* and ethnic Koreans living in Japan. To the authors' discredit, however, the idea that blatant discrimination often masquerades as an innocuous cultural trait is not directly addressed, though some of the discussion questions following the chapter do hedge around this theme.

For all the benefits this text can bring to increasing cross-cultural understanding and communication, there are a few areas of contemporary culture that are not addressed and a few areas that lack clarity. Though the ideas of *bigaku*, the Japanese sense of beauty, and *iitoko-dori*, adopting elements of foreign culture, are addressed in chapter format, neither touches on the near religious devotion that many Japanese pay to brand name goods. A chapter on this fairly recent trend in Japanese society would prove most insightful, especially as this obsession seems to fly in the face of the traditional sense of *wabi sabi*, which stresses lack of ornamentation. Similarly lacking is a thorough discussion on the downside of ambiguity in Japanese communication. Early in the text, ambiguity is said to protect people, but this belies the fact that ambiguity also causes undue amounts of stress and worry on the part of those who are left in the dark. Finally, the presentation of Japanese people as having one mind, apparent in the title of the book by the choice of the specific, definite article "the", suggests that in the end the myriad individuals that make up Japan can somehow be homogenized and presented as a nicely wrapped package, devoid of individuality. Just a short stay in Japan, however, will quickly

reveal that many Japanese do not fit this nicely poured mold, and still others within the society are expending great amounts of energy to expand and change some of the more traditional understandings of what it means to be Japanese.

Overall, I believe this book has much to offer readers, whether in the classroom setting or simply in an armchair on a Sunday afternoon. A close read and a sincere investigation of the discussion activities and ideas covered in this book will certainly lead to a clearer understanding of Japan, and I believe this is the main goal the writers have in mind.

Joseph Sheehan

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