

読売新聞 THE DAILY YOMIURI

'Japanese Mind' bursting with powerful analysis

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The Japanese Mind: Understanding Contemporary Japanese Culture

Edited by Roger J. Davies and Osamu Ikeno

Tuttle, 270 pp, 2,200 yen

For most of her modern history, Japan has offered exceptional hospitality to the English language. In the bubble years, Japan's investment in English-language textbooks, teachers, schools and other resources topped that of any other nation. Yet, despite this commitment, in most standard tests of English fluency Japan is still bumping along at the bottom of the international league.

Students are not the only ones with problems. Makiko Tanaka was one of only a handful of fluent English-speaking foreign ministers since Yosuke Matsuoka startled the world with his Oregon accent in the early 1930s. As for prime ministers, one need only recall the legendary Yoshiro Mori-Bill Clinton exchange at the Group of Eight summit in Okinawa Prefecture in 2000:

Mori: Who are you?

Clinton (wittily): I'm Hillary's husband.

Mori: Me too!

What are the roots of the problem? In a 1999 interview in Japan Echo, the sociolinguist Takao Suzuki maintained that Japan's intellectual relationship with the West has been characterized by extraordinary passivity. As Suzuki saw it, Japan has been importing and deciphering foreign texts for so long that the Japanese have forgotten that intercultural communication is a two-way flow. Suzuki connected this historical emphasis on passive reception, not expression, to the failure of English teaching in Japan to produce significant numbers of fluent English speakers.

As if in response to this perceived imbalance, Roger Davies and Osamu Ikeno have compiled the collective writings on Japanese society of 29 fourth-year students of cross-cultural communication at Ehime University, Matsuyama. The collection is intended both as a university-level textbook for Japanese studies students and is also, according to the introduction, for "Japanese students of English who will need to explain and discuss their native culture in English in order to participate effectively in an increasingly globalized world." Takao Suzuki's prescription exactly.

Arranged in 28 short essays, the great value of this collection lies in its writers' keenness to engage in the discussion of Japanese values as a whole, from *aimai* (ambiguity) to *zoto* (gift-giving). Where some introductory texts might provide only a self-contained definition of *uchi* (intimate, family or group) and *soto* (outside, outsider), the Ehime students show how *hedataru* (granting personal space to others) can be used to negotiate between the extremes of personal and impersonal contexts. Where most scholars explain *gambari* (patience and determination) in the context of high school entrance exams, *The Japanese Mind* relates it to *karoshi* (death from overwork).

In the discussion of *danjo kankei* (relationships between the sexes), the authors survey women's loss of status since ancient times, changes in male-female relationships, the advent of *ryosaikenbo* (good wife, wise mother), negative expressions for women, husband and wife relationships, and the position of women before and after marriage—all in seven closely argued pages. Twenty-five of the 29 student authors are women, an interesting disproportion that may account for the inspired precision of this particular section.

This integrated approach shows how individual values fit into a social system. By grouping *honne* and *tatemae* with *haragei* (implicit communication) as well as that old standby *amae* (dependence on others' goodwill), we begin to see how the Japanese get things done—or not, as the case may be. If A doesn't much fancy a night out with B, she can save B's face by expressing superficial enthusiasm (*tatemae*) and at the same time depend (*amae*) on the quality of B's *haragei* to pick up on her lack of interest and suggest another time.

Throughout, the text is a model of plain, clear English—although some might wonder at female primary school students' appetite for "fairly tales" (page 181). The students and teachers of Ehime University have come up with a book stuffed to bursting with powerful analysis and sparkling intuition. *The Japanese Mind* works both as an exciting and tightly focused English teaching aid and as the best introduction to Japanese society since Takie and William Lebra's landmark 1970s reader *Japanese Culture and Behavior*.

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