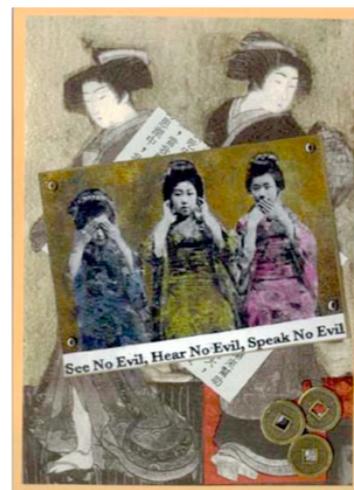


Chapter Five - Harmony: 和 (Wa)

I. Reading

I Can't See You

A Japanese theatrical art form originating in Osaka is called 文楽 (*bunraku*) - half-scale puppets, each controlled by three puppeteers. It has always struck me that *bunraku* is somehow essentially Japanese. Of course, there are the content and themes of the plays themselves, the long tradition of technique and method, but what strikes me as so Japanese is that the puppeteers (人形遣い) are completely visible to the audience (though dressed in black). The audience is expected to *not see* them.



This is just one example of many situations in Japan in which one is expected to just close one's eyes—or ears—to avoid acknowledgment of something. Someone in the office is sleeping in a meeting? Pretend that he's not. A conversation taking place on the other side of a paper *shoji* screen (that is, a "wall")? Pretend you can't hear it. Need to get that spinach out from between your teeth? Just put a hand in front of your mouth and use a toothpick to your heart's content—it's behind your hand, so we can all pretend it's not really happening.

Elemental to the Japanese mind is the ability to ignore or put up with all kinds of unpleasantness, at least superficially, in the interest of harmony. This special forbearance (寛容) even has its own name, one that is all but untranslatable into English: 我慢 (*gaman*). Oh, the word can be translated as "to bear" or "to put up with," but the twist is that, in Japan, this is a positive quality. Such people are admiringly described as 我慢強い (*gamanzuyoi*). Yet, someone exhibiting this quality in the west might be seen as weak, afraid, insecure, spineless, or even hypocritical.

One of the common explanations for this difference is based on the population density of Japan, suggesting that a society in which so many people living together in such close quarters needed to develop a way to live day to day without driving each other crazy. The contrastive situation would be the American frontier or the Australian outback; one could do whatever one wanted without concern for the neighbors because, well, there were no neighbors.

Whether this sufficiently explains the differences or not, it is true that Westerners are much less likely to ignore things or let things go for the sake of harmony or face. As justification, they may cite principle, forthrightness, honesty, justice, or truth, but it is certain that none of these is likely to take a back seat to harmony.

I'm (not really) sorry

One of the first words a foreign visitor to Japan learns after getting off the plane is すみません (*sumimasen*). His translator may explain its meaning as "I'm sorry" or "Excuse me," but the visitor soon realizes that the explanation is not nearly so simple. To say one is sorry in English is generally a rather strong expression of regret and remorse, and is often followed up with an offer of restitution (損害賠償). The Japanese すみません is a social lubricant; it offers the possibility that one is, in fact, sorry. What matters, though, is the



expression rather than the *real feeling* of regret or remorse. (See Chapter Fifteen.) The Japanese word for functioning at this level is 立前 (*tatema*); its closest English equivalents are hypocrisy or “white lie.” These English words have a much more negative connotation (含蓄) than the Japanese word *tatema*.

Meetings: Wait, I have a better idea!

The importance of harmony is clearly illustrated by the differences in Japanese and Western business meetings. Most western business meetings are held to gather new information, debate issues and courses of action, and make decisions. New ideas and new information are expected, frank discussion and debate are common, and talks can become quite heated. Japanese meetings, on the other hand are usually held after all this has been done behind the scenes. The special word for this in Japanese is 根回し (*nemawashi*). Information is shared, people discuss what will be said, even decide in advance what needs to be decided. To a westerner, the meeting itself seems like nothing more than a dramatic performance: participants read from documents that have been passed out in advance, old information is restated, people agree on what they have already agreed on prior to the meeting. Of course, what the Westerner is missing is the importance of this formal, official (if sometimes superficial) expression of harmony.

Early in my career here, when my meager linguistic ability was still greater than my cultural grasp, I was sitting in a Japanese business meeting, and decided, as would be common for any Westerner, that I would impress everyone with my insight and understanding. After one of my colleagues gave his “report” and asked if there were any comments or questions, I shocked quite a few people by actually raising my hand - and then suggesting doing things in a new, improved way. Of course, I had discussed this with no one beforehand. I’m not sure how many minutes passed with everyone silently staring at a point on the desk directly in front of them, but I know it certainly seemed like a very long time!

You like 納豆 (*nattou*)? I can’t stand it!

When Westerners who don’t know each other very well speak to each other, they will generally avoid certain topics that might be controversial or in some way draw attention to differences in their rank. Such topics would include politics, religion, salary, physical characteristics, and so forth. However, on topics that are not controversial - music or art, for example - frank, direct disagreement or differences of opinion are perfectly OK.

Look at the differences in the conversation patterns:

Monica: Last night I saw this great musical, *Wicked*.

Rachel: Oh? I really don’t care much for musicals. I’m thinking of reading the book on which it’s based, though.

Hiro: 昨日。。。見た?! タイガーズ勝った!

Yuji: そうか。。。タイガーズ今年はね。。。サッカーも好きですか?

One of the reasons for these differences is that Westerners perceive a bigger separation between the person and his opinions. I can hate the music you love (and tell you so), but still like you and consider you a close friend. In fact, I hate most of the music my wife listens to, yet I love her dearly and we get along just fine. Another reason for the difference is that expressing a contrary opinion threatens the harmony of the discussion, and threatening the harmony in Japan is not polite at all. Try to imagine that Westerners might invite a certain person to a party *because* he can be counted on to create controversial (unharmonious) discussion!

II. Comprehension Questions

If you have a difficult time answering these questions, read the passage again. If you can't find the answer, make a note of your question and ask the teacher for an explanation in your next class.

1. What is one thing about *Bunraku* that is unmistakably Japanese?
2. What might a westerner think of the concept of "*gaman*"? How is this different from the Japanese way of thinking?
3. Why do Japanese and Westerners place such a different value on harmony?
4. Why does the practice of *nemawashi* make more sense in Japan than in the West?
5. Why do you think Westerners are more likely to state their disagreement more openly than most Japanese?

III. Thinking

New words and expressions

What are the main points in this chapter?

General summary of main points.

List some examples from your own life or observations that support these points:

List some examples from your own life or observations that do not support these points:

Your reactions and opinions: