

THE JAPANESE MIND

*Understanding Contemporary
Japanese Culture*

Edited by
Roger J. Davies
&
Osamu Ikeno

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Japan

Tuttle Publishing
Yaekari Building, 3rd Floor
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Shinagawa-ku
Tokyo 141 0032
Tel: (81) 03 5437-0171
Fax: (81) 03 5437-0755
tuttle-sales@gol.com

Asia Pacific

Berkeley Books Pte. Ltd.
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Tel: (65) 6280-1330
Fax: (65) 6280-6290
inquiries@periplus.com.sg
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apprentice or disciple through the mastery of certain skills under the auspices of a master. Is the relationship between Obi-Wan and Luke Skywalker in *Star Wars* or, later, between Luke and Yoda, the same as the relationship between a master and a disciple in the Japanese martial arts?

3. There are people who point out that American baseball and its Japanese counterpart, *yakyu*, exhibit important differences. In what ways are these differences related to *bushidō*?

4. Many societies in the world have had strong warrior codes. Compare some of these traditions with the Japanese concept of *bushidō*.

5. In Asia, the Japanese are still feared for their military potential. Do you think these fears are justified? Why, or why not?

沈黙

Chinmoku:

SILENCE IN JAPANESE COMMUNICATION

Communication among human beings takes various forms and includes not only verbal but also nonverbal expression such as gestures, facial expressions, posture. Such nonverbal communication is mostly unconscious but nevertheless plays an essential role in human relationships. Silence, or *chinmoku*, in particular, can be viewed as a communicative skill, not just a form of emptiness between spoken words. As Tannen (cited in Lebra, 1987, p. 343) notes, "Silence can be a matter of saying nothing and meaning something." Different societies view silence in different ways, however, depending on cultural values, which determine how silence is interpreted. *Chinmoku* in Japanese communication has certain distinct features, which derive from the underlying values of Japanese culture that determine how silence appears and functions in communication in Japanese society.

THE UNDERLYING CAUSES OF CHINMOKU

In daily conversations, business meetings, and school classrooms in Japan, silence is much more common and is of longer duration than in Western countries. There are a number of reasons for silence being so ubiquitous in Japanese communication, and these causes can be classified into two main categories: historical factors and the dominance of group consciousness in Japanese life.

The Japanese have long treated silence as a kind of virtue similar to "truthfulness." The words *haragei* and *ishin denshin* symbolize Japanese attitudes toward human interactions in this regard. The former means implicit mutual understanding; the latter suggests that people can communicate with each other through telepathy. In short, what is important and what is true in Japan will often exist in silence, not in verbal expression. This attitude is deeply rooted in a Japanese way of thinking known as *uchi-soto*, or inner and outer duality. Lebra (1987, p. 345) provides an explanation:

[The Japanese] believe that the truth lies only in the inner realm as symbolically located in the heart or belly. Components of the outer self, such as face, mouth, spoken words, are in contrast, associated with cognitive and moral falsity. Truthfulness, sincerity, straightforwardness, or reliability are allied to reticence. Thus a man of few words is trusted more than a man of many words.

Zen Buddhism is thought to have had a great influence on the development of these attitudes toward silence in Japan. The goal of Zen practice is not stated explicitly but is understood only at a deeper intuitive level within learners themselves through constant practice, which puts emphasis on meditation, quietude, and emptying one's mind. Zen training is designed to teach that truth cannot be described verbally, but can exist only in silence. Traditional Japanese arts and the spirit of *dō* (the "way" or "path") reflect this characteristic silence. Japanese music, for example, is said to contain *ma*, meaning "intervals between sounds," which are considered important because "it is the interval which determines the rhythm, while the beat is subsidiary and serves to enhance the interval" (Dan; cited in Lebra, 1987, p. 355). Similarly, in *kabuki* dramas and *Noh* plays, it is the silence between the lines that expresses tension, excitement, and the climax. *Dō* practices such as *shodō* (calligraphy) and *kadō* (flower arrangement) also emphasize quietude and a grave atmosphere in which a controlled attitude contained within silence leads learners to the development of skill and success.

Another reason why the Japanese often become silent among other people is group consciousness, which is symbolized by the

saying "The nail that sticks out will be hammered down" (*Deru kui wa utareru*). In Japanese society, where people usually identify themselves primarily as members of certain groups, not just as individuals, silence has played a very important role in creating harmony and in avoiding direct conflict. The person who insists on his or her opinion before the group has reached a consensus is seen as selfish and forward (Naotsuka, 1996, p. 193). In addition, to show off one's ability or knowledge openly makes a bad impression on others in Japan, and such people are considered thoughtless, impolite, and immature. Many people in Japan think that it is better to say nothing than cause misunderstandings or trouble. Silence in Japanese communication is also related to a strong consciousness of social hierarchy within the group and in society at large. In social interactions among the Japanese, it is essential to consider which person is in a higher or a lower position, depending on his or her age, sex, job status, and so on. It is considered rude for a subordinate to speak out openly against a person of higher rank.

THE FUNCTIONS OF CHINMOKU

There are both positive and negative aspects to the functions of silence in Japan. To begin with, it is important to note exactly when Japanese people are silent. Silence occurs when people have nothing to say, of course, but it does not always mean that they have no ideas. Silence is commonly thought to indicate thoughtfulness or hesitation in trying to find a good way to communicate smoothly; therefore, even though people have something to say, they may not express everything that they have in mind and may leave their true intentions unspoken. This kind of silence is known as *enryo-sasshi* (i.e., reserve and restraint). In high-context Japanese culture (Hall, 1970), direct verbal expression, especially negative forms of communication such as anger, hate, refusal, disagreement, and defiance are avoided:

Ideas and feelings that might hurt the other person or damage the general atmosphere when expressed are carefully sent back for reexamination in an internal self-feedback process. Only those ideas judged safe and vague are allowed to be sent out through the small exit that functions as a screen filter. This message-screening

process . . . is *enryo*; it makes the Japanese appear silent, vague, and awkward in communicating with superiors, strangers, and people from different cultures. (Ishii & Bruneau, 1994, p. 250)

Japanese TV commercials provide a good illustration of *enryo-sasshi* in communication. In ads promoting pharmaceutical drugs, for example, it is common to have famous actors or TV personalities play the role of "warm family members" in promoting a medicine rather than to clearly explain its efficacy because this tends to be felt as "wordy" or "pushy" by Japanese consumers. People prefer being appealed to gradually in a more "feeling" atmosphere in Japanese forms of communication (Akiyama, 1994, p. 48).

Japanese silence occurs not only in public but also in private interactions, particularly in conjugal relationships, because "[the couple] are in love but too embarrassed to express their feelings in speech" (Lebra, 1987, p. 349). Husbands and wives in Japan tend not to use overt verbal communication and try to understand each other by nonverbal means, especially when they attempt to express tender emotions (*ibid.*). Silence in this case may reflect their feelings of embarrassment caused by closeness or intimacy, or it may have to do with a specific Japanese way of thinking related to *ishin denshin* and *enryo-sasshi*. Silence thus functions as a kind of lubricating oil to create smoother communication because it can help to avoid hurting others and contributes to a peaceful and harmonious atmosphere, allowing people to overcome difficult situations in a calm and unhurried way.

On the other hand, silence can frequently cause misunderstandings, even in Japanese interactions. In fact, it is not unusual for people to feel irritated and impatient when they cannot understand each other because their expressions are too indirect to follow. It is also true that in Japan, actions or judgments tend to be delayed, so it often takes too much time to clarify the facts and solve problematic situations.

The Japanese may also be silent not only to avoid conflict with others but also to hurt someone or to keep them at a distance. When people feel angry or are in disagreement with others, they may not

directly express their feelings but often just keep silent and ignore the other person. This behavior characterizes bullying, which has recently become a much more serious problem among Japanese children. If students see someone being bullied, they may not mention anything about the fact and just try to keep a distance from both the assailant and the victim, for fear of being mixed up in the bullying themselves. Similarly, in a train, if people recognize that someone is being molested, they may not say anything to help the victim, because they are afraid of disapproval for their forward behavior, or simply because they are apathetic. In short, silence also means defiance and indifference in Japanese life.

In addition, silence can function as a weapon to protect one's position or to conceal facts when someone has done something wrong or feels guilty. For example, Japanese politicians, business executives, and school principals are known to resort to silence to hide unpalatable facts or evade their responsibilities. These attitudes reflect a Japanese value called *kusai mono niwa futa* ("to sweep the dirt under the carpet"), and not only people with special status but also ordinary Japanese often try to avoid facing up to negative situations.

Silence as a way of avoiding direct or potentially troublesome expression can thus function either positively or negatively. To create a relaxed and harmonious atmosphere, silence may play an important role in Japanese interactions, but it can also arise from less noble attitudes such as shirking responsibility, awkwardness, or apathy.

THE ROLE OF CHINMOKU IN CROSS-CULTURAL MISUNDERSTANDINGS

Even in communication among the Japanese themselves, it is sometimes difficult to understand the actual meaning and function of silence. In communication with people from other countries, silence can become a serious obstacle to intercultural understanding.

For one thing, as has been explained, when the Japanese are silent, it may imply a wide range of meanings, such as consideration or sympathy, modesty, agreement, patience, embarrassment, resentment, lack of forgiveness or defiance, and apathy. This can cause confusion

for non-Japanese, as they usually do not have similar cultural values that help them to interpret the meaning of silence. In fact, sometimes they will have totally opposite attitudes and values.

Generally speaking, Western cultures have long emphasized verbal expression and communicating opinions and emotions clearly and openly:

The Western tradition is relatively negative in its attitude toward silence and ambiguity, especially in social and public relations. People seldom recognize that silence does have linking, affecting revelational, judgmental, and activating communicative functions in Western cultures. (Jensen; cited in Ishii & Bruneau, 1994, p. 247)

At the same time, there may be a different concept of time, depending on the communication style. According to Naotsuka (1996, pp. 220–223), many people from other countries consider the Japanese communication style, which is characterized by silence and indirectness, as “wasting time.” Japanese society is based on the smooth maintenance of relationships among group members, whereas relationships in the West put more emphasis on individualism, so that time spent in silence or for indirect purposes may be seen as not very productive (*ibid.*, p. 221).

However, Westerners are not always more talkative and frank than the Japanese. In some situations, the Japanese can ask certain kinds of blunt personal questions, such as “How old are you?” or “Are you married?” Although Western people may consider these kinds of questions impolite or “intrusions of privacy” (*ibid.*, p. 113), in Japanese relationships, where people are attuned to depending on one another, personal information of this nature is needed in order to get along with others.

Judging from the above, although there are a number of important cultural differences in communication styles, people may not consciously be aware of them and will judge or criticize others according to their own values or standards of communication. This can be one of the most troublesome obstacles to intercultural understanding.

DISCUSSION ACTIVITIES

Exploring Japanese Culture

1. It is thought that silence plays an important role in maintaining harmony and avoiding conflict in Japan. Do you agree?
2. In the classroom, there are two types of quiet students—those who do not have their own ideas and do not usually think about issues, and those who are thoughtful and very conscious of their own feelings. Most recent problems in Japanese schools have to do with the latter group, who remain silent until their emotions overflow and cannot be controlled. Discuss this problem.
3. Do you think that the concept of *chinmoku* contributes to the rising number of cases of teenage and adult violence in Japan? Discuss this with reference to the case in Niigata of the nine-year-old girl who was held captive in her kidnapper’s home for nine years.
4. In what ways do childrearing practices in Japan reinforce the concept of *chinmoku*?
5. In Japan, people often prefer to remain silent rather than hurt someone else’s feelings. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of this approach to interpersonal relations in terms of society as a whole.
6. In Japan, a man of few words is considered a thoughtful person and is trusted more than a man of many words. Moreover, although a Japanese man is looked down upon if he talks too much, most people feel that it is all right for women to talk more openly and freely. How do you feel about these attitudes?
7. Japanese couples often communicate by nonverbal means, and silence is generally an accepted part of the relationship. Can genuine communication develop in this way, and are people really satisfied with this kind of silence in a relationship?

8. In Japanese schools, PTA meetings often go smoothly because nobody interrupts by asking questions or criticizing school policies. People usually do not ask questions officially, but after the meeting they exchange opinions frankly in the corridor, and this is known as a "corridor meeting." What do you think about this way of dealing with issues?

9. Haiku are said to be the shortest poems in the world, and what is not said is considered just as important as what is said. In other words, artistic truth exists in tension created by using limited verbal expression. How does this relate to the concept of *chinmoku* in Japan?

Exploring Cross-Cultural Issues

1. It is quite difficult to show your real abilities and knowledge openly in Japan. For instance, even if you have talent within a company, you are expected to remain silent and do the work you have been assigned diligently. How is this different from other countries?

2. Do you think that *chinmoku* is a barrier to Japan's becoming more internationalized? If so, how can this be overcome?

3. Many Western people are uncomfortable with silence, because it is generally associated with negative feelings or concepts. Indeed, for some, the enforcement of silence is seen as an infringement of "the right to speak." Discuss how this notion of silence causes problems in cross-cultural communication, especially between people of Japan and the West.

4. In English, there is a traditional saying that "children should be seen and not heard." Compare this with attitudes in Japan and other countries of the world.

5. In the West, children are brought up to communicate openly with adults and to express their opinions, ask questions, and even to

criticize. In Japan, however, children are generally shy and do not often know how to speak to adults. What is your view on verbal training in Japan compared with the West?

6. In Japanese schools, students are expected to listen to their teachers without interrupting and without asking questions, and they have few opportunities to express their opinions. Compare this with schools in the West.

7. In homestay situations, Japanese young people staying with Western families sometimes think that being polite means staying silent, but this kind of behavior is often worrying for the homestay family, who may think that the Japanese young person is unhappy. How can this problem be resolved?

8. *Chinmoku* is an important concept in Japan. Does the same attitude toward silence exist in other Asian countries?