

THE JAPANESE MIND

*Understanding Contemporary
Japanese Culture*

Edited by
Roger J. Davies
&
Osamu Ikeno

TUTTLE PUBLISHING
Tokyo • Rutland, Vermont • Singapore

OESTERLE LIBRARY, NCC
NAPERVILLE IL 60540

First published in the United States in 2002 by Tuttle Publishing, an imprint of Periplus Editions (HK) Ltd., with editorial offices at Periplus Editions (HK) Ltd., with editorial offices at 364 Innovation Drive, North Clarendon, Vermont 05759 U.S.A.

©2002 Roger Davies and Osamu Ikeno

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without prior written permission from the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication

Davies, Roger, 1949–

The Japanese mind : understanding contemporary culture / by Roger Davies.

—1st ed.

270p. 21cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-8048-3295-1 (pb.)

1. Characteristics, Japanese. 2. Japan—20th century. I. Title.

DS830 .D38 2001

952.03'3—dc21

2001043625

ISBN-10: 0-8048-3295-1

ISBN-13: 978-0-8048-3295-3

Distributed by

**North America, Latin America
& Europe**

Tuttle Publishing

364 Innovation Drive

North Clarendon, VT 05759-9436 U.S.A.

Tel: 1 (802) 773-8930

Fax: 1 (802) 773-6993

info@tuttlepublishing.com

www.tuttlepublishing.com

Japan

Tuttle Publishing

Yaekari Building, 3rd Floor

5-4-12 Osaki

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.

130 Joo Seng Road #06-01

Singapore 368357

Tel: (65) 6280-1330

Fax: (65) 6280-6290

inquiries@periplus.com.sg

www.periplus.com

10 09 08 07

12 11 10 9 8

Printed in Canada

TUTTLE PUBLISHING® is a registered trademark of Tuttle Publishing,
a division of Periplus Editions (HK) Ltd.

CONTENTS

Japanese Chronology	vii
Introduction	3
Acknowledgments	7
Aimai: Ambiguity and the Japanese	9
Amae: The Concept of Japanese Dependence	17
Amakudari: Descent from Heaven	23
Bigaku: The Japanese Sense of Beauty	35
Bushidō: The Way of the Warrior	41
Chinmoku: Silence in Japanese Communication	51
Danjyo Kankei: Male and Female Relationships in Japan	61
The Dō Spirit of Japan	71
Gambari: Japanese Patience and Determination	83
Giri: Japanese Social Obligations	95
Haragei: An Implicit Way of Communicating in Japan	103
Hedataru to Najimu: Japanese Personal Space	109
Honne to Tatemaie: Private vs. Public Stance in Japan	115
The Japanese Ie System	119
Iitoko-Dori: Adopting Elements of Foreign Culture	127
Ikuji: Childrearing Practices in Japan	135
Kenkyo: The Japanese Virtue of Modesty	143
Kisetsu: The Japanese Sense of the Seasons	153

goals? How can traditional educational practices be adapted to modern goals in order to provide students with the skills they need to achieve success in a rapidly changing world?

5. In the Japanese martial arts, teaching is kept simple, inflexible, and strictly controlled and involves imitating a master rather than providing detailed and analytical verbal explanations:

The traditional skills in particular are learned not so much by analysis and verbal explanation as by personal transmission from master to disciple through example and imitation. The teacher-disciple bond is a very important one . . . , but of equal importance is the fact that learning is more an intuitive than a rational process. The individual is supposed to learn to merge with the skill until his mastery of it has become effortless. He does not establish intellectual control over it so much as spiritual oneness with it. (Reischauer, 1988, p. 166)

What are the advantages and disadvantages of this way of learning? As the martial arts, as well as some of the aesthetic arts, are being practiced throughout the world today, how well do students from other countries adapt to this approach to learning? Should this approach be maintained in the future?

頑張り

Gambari:

JAPANESE PATIENCE AND DETERMINATION

After the Meiji Restoration in 1868, Japan rapidly modernized itself, and after World War II, the Japanese reconstructed their ruined country to become a powerful economic nation. Even today, the Japanese are often said to be diligent, sometimes to the point of being workaholic, characteristics that are best exemplified in the expression *gambari*, the noun form of the verb *gambaru*.

Gambari reflects an essential component of the modern Japanese character as it has developed since historical times. In daily life, the Japanese use the term *gambari* very often, and this overuse seems to point to certain Japanese characteristics, some of which have negative effects. In addition, the concept of *gambari* is now changing, and the term is losing much of its traditional strength, especially among the young. This chapter will examine the Japanese way of thinking and national characteristics that are based on *gambari*, the reasons why the Japanese are so diligent, and recent changing attitudes regarding this expression.

THE BACKGROUND OF GAMBARI

Gambaru is a frequently used word in Japan, with the meaning of doing one's best and hanging on. For example, students *gambaru* (study hard) in order to pass entrance examinations. Athletes also *gambaru* (practice hard) to win games or medals. Moreover, company workers *gambaru* (work hard) to raise their company's sales. Also,

when the Japanese make up their minds to begin something, they tend to think "*gambaru*" in the initial stages of the project. When a young woman from a small town, on leaving for a new job in the city, promises her friends, parents, and teachers that she will *gambaru*, the implication is that she will not disappoint them. The word is also used by friends as a kind of greeting, often in the imperative form *gambare* or *gambatte*. In this situation the meaning is rather ambiguous. The Japanese use these expressions at least once a day with good-bye and also write them at the end of letters. With this usage, they encourage one another with the implication "Please keep up your hard work until your goals are achieved." The term connotes high achievement, motivation, and orientation to group harmony (Wagatsuma, 1983, p. 5). The word is also used among group members to encourage one another in cooperative activities. For example, during track and field days at school, children can be heard shouting "*gambare*" or "*gambatte*" to encourage their friends running in races. In 1998, the Japanese team participated in World Cup soccer matches, which were held in France, and the Japanese spectators cheered on their team under the slogan of "*Gambare, Nippon!*" During the championship, this slogan was used on TV programs and commercials every day. In addition, several years ago, after the big earthquake in Kobe, the slogan "*Gambarō Kobe*" (*gambarō* is the volitional form of *gambaru*) encouraged the people of Kobe to reconstruct their city and rebuild their lives. Most Japanese use this word frequently, and it is found in newspapers everywhere. *Gambari* has a lot of different grammatical forms depending on the situation, and it is used with a wide range of meanings, from the superficial to the profound.

THE MEANING OF GAMBARI

The meaning of *gambari* has changed greatly over time. Historically, it meant to assert or insist on oneself. According to the *Sanshodo Japanese Dictionary* (Kenbō, 1989, p. 218), *gambaru* is defined in the following ways: (1) to work hard and patiently, (2) to insist on having one's way, and (3) to occupy one place and never leave. In recent times, the first definition has generally been taken to be the principal meaning of *gambaru*. Although the origin of *gambari* is still being debated, two theories have developed. One argues that *gambari* comes from *gam-baru*, "to

strain one's eyes, open one's eyes wide, keep an eye on something"; the other contends that *gambaru* is derived from *ga-o-haru*, "to be self-willed," an expression that originally had the negative connotation of asserting oneself against group decisions and norms (Wagatsuma, op. cit.). Since the 1930s, however, *gambaru* has become a positive expression, commonly used to exhort enthusiasm and hard work from others, usually toward group objectives.

According to Amanuma (1987, pp. 51-53), *gambaru* does not have any exact equivalent in non-Japanese languages. In other words, there are no words to express the many nuances of *gambaru* exactly. Amanuma (ibid., p. 51) further states that in a discussion on the subject, scholars, journalists, and graduate students from other countries who know the Japanese and Japanese culture well provided expressions that are close to *gambaru* in their mother tongues, such as *aushalten*, *beharren*, and *beharrung* in German; *tiens bon* in French; *aguante* in Spanish; and *chā yo* in Chinese. The Americans said that *persist in* or *insist on* were close to a part of the meaning of *gambaru*, but did not completely cover its meanings and did not express its many complex nuances. Amanuma (ibid., pp. 49-50) further states that even the Chinese and Koreans have no equivalent word for *gambaru*, although the word is indicated by a Chinese character that was introduced to Japan from China through Korea. Both Chinese and Korean have the characters that make up *gambaru*, but they do not have expressions that possess the same nuances. This suggests that *gambaru* is an expression that is unique to Japan and expresses certain qualities of the Japanese character.

DIFFERENT WAYS OF THINKING

Different ways of thinking about work, which are related to the concept of *gambaru*, can be seen in the following two proverbs that are famous in America and Japan: "The monk who does not work should not eat" (Japan); "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy" (America). According to Amanuma (ibid., pp. 131-133), on the whole, to have free time, to do nothing, or not to work gives the Japanese an unpleasant feeling. They tend to think that having free time is wasteful, even shameful, and feel uneasy. As Matsumoto (1994, p. 142) also notes, in Japan working hard and straining when serious are

considered to be good; it is neglectful not to try hard, and the ideal is to make an effort seriously, regardless of the results. Consequently, the Japanese try to *gambaru*, and the following two examples illustrate this characteristic. The five-day school week occurred only once a month in Japan until recently, when it was changed to twice a month, putting teachers and parents in a quandary because they did not know what children should do on these additional holidays, and conferences had to be held throughout Japan to develop useful activities for the children. Moreover, as Tsuzino (1993, pp. 159-160) points out, many Japanese men do not know what to do with themselves after they retire, since their purpose in living had always been to work. As a result, the number of elderly people who commit suicide has been increasing, and the problem is now under consideration at the National Diet.

On the other hand, Matsumoto (1994, p. 147) contends that it is crucial for Americans to have free time. In America, people consider ability more important than effort, and the person who can relax and even make a joke in a serious situation is well considered. Many Americans also look forward to retirement (Tsuzino, 1993, p. 158), so stationery stores offer a variety of cards containing expressions such as "happy retirement." Not only in America, but also in France, retirement is well received. François Mitterand, the former president of France, lowered the retirement age from sixty-five to sixty, and this reform was considered one of the most important during his ten years of political power. Matsuoka (1989, p. 135) explains these contrasting attitudes as follows:

There are some expressions that are often used in America but seldom in Japan, such as "take it easy." Americans say to a person who is busy working, "take it easy" or "don't work too hard"; in contrast, the Japanese say "*gambatte*" (or work hard) as a sign of encouragement. Americans, of course, also think that it necessary to be diligent, but as the proverb says, "all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy," suggesting that working too hard is not good for you.

Even in Korea, which has a culture closer to that of Japan, people have almost the same expression as in America, meaning "take it easy." Lee (1982, pp. 175-176) explains that Korean people often use expressions, the equivalent of "relax" or "soften your body," to someone who is beginning a new project, but hardly ever say "*gambare*" or "work hard." Fluidity and relaxation enable the Korean people to display their potential power (*ibid.*); in contrast, the Japanese tend to show their ability through strain and effort.

THE DEEPER CAUSES OF GAMBARI

Three reasons can be suggested as to the origins of the *gambari* spirit: rice growing, the geographical conditions imposed on Japan, and equal opportunities in raising one's social class. According to Amanuma (1987, p. 140), rice growing left a permanent imprint on the Japanese character. It has always been the most traditional and intensive form of agriculture in Japan, ever since it was introduced from China in the Jōmon period. This farming style typically needs periods of particularly intensive labor in certain seasons, especially during rice planting and harvest time. Thus, such ancient agricultural customs as working for short periods with all one's strength are said to have helped build the Japanese *gambari* spirit (*ibid.*, p. 143).

In addition, according to Miyazaki (1969, pp. 269-272), the difficult climate and geography of Japan cause characteristic Japanese diligence:

The climate of Japan has high temperatures and humidity. In addition, geographical conditions are really difficult, for there are a lot of disasters such as floods, typhoons, and earthquakes. Steep mountain ranges penetrate the center of the narrow mainland. The land on both sides is sandwiched between the Japan Sea and the Pacific Ocean, and the seashores have a lot of steep slopes and few plains. Thus, most of the rivers flow rapidly and often overflow because of abundant rainfall. These challenging geographical conditions never give to Japanese a sense of calm and leisure; on the contrary, they make people restless and diligent.

Finally, equal opportunities for raising one's social status provide the Japanese with incentives to *gambaru*. After the Meiji Restoration, a lot of reforms in the class structure and educational system took place. The class system of the Edo period, known as *shi-nō-kō-shō* (samurai, farmers, artisans, merchants), was abolished early in the Meiji, and with the Gakusei Proclamation ("encouragement of studying"), which was promulgated in 1872, about 80 percent of children had the opportunity to go to school. Moreover, in 1947, compulsory education edicts were issued, and virtually all the children received education, giving everybody a chance to go on to a higher level of schooling and attain a better position in society. Amanuma (1987, p. 154) maintains that this chain of reforms enabled individual Japanese to raise their positions in society through their own efforts; that is, through *gambari*:

Many Japanese who achieved great works came from normal, even poor families. For example, Prime Ministers like Hirofumi Ito and the heads of Honda and Mitsubishi came from the lower classes. So, many students in the Meiji were engaged in *gambaru*, dreaming of becoming a Prime Minister or a doctor in the future. (Kato, 1978, pp. 183-188)

Even today, schoolchildren study very hard in order to pass the entrance exams of higher-level universities because after entering such schools, they will be respected and sure to get a job at a good company. This achievement-based society and the equal opportunities provided by the educational system created a competitive world and reinforced the *gambari* spirit of the Japanese people.

PROBLEMS WITH GAMBARI

For the Japanese, doing one's best and enduring difficult situations patiently in order to achieve one's goals—to *gambaru*—is considered to be one of the highest virtues. However, sometimes this kind of *gambari* causes negative results. A typical example is *karōshi*, or death from overwork, which has been increasing year by year. Businessmen are often forced to work late at night without breaks or holidays, and as a result, some of them die of heart attacks or

strokes. The number of claims filed by families for compensation as a result of death from overwork is about 500 a year on average in Japan, but the real figure is considered to be several thousand, because companies often try to cover up to avoid admitting responsibility (Kawato, 1991, p. 8). According to Kawato (*ibid.*, p. 10) . . . ,

. . . the reasons for overwork are thought to be the worker's diligent character and the nature of the enterprise. First, the worker's assiduity—*gambari*—does not let him take a rest. Second, the atmosphere in the company forces workers to *gambaru*. The worker who takes rests and does not put in extra hours will be estimated poorly. This low estimation will keep him from promotion. In addition, some employees who reject overtime work are laid off.

The fanaticism of the Japanese can also be seen in *gambari*. According to Miyazaki (1969, p. 274), people in Japan are easily influenced by others because of the importance of groupism, adding that some of these people are apt to become fanatical and lose control in certain situations. This fanaticism is reflected in *gambari*, which is often displayed blindly and instantaneously, such as was typically exhibited during World War II:

During the war, military authorities took full advantage of this Japanese characteristic. The Japanese were forced to *gambaru* and many went into the war blindly. Some people, however, opposed this policy, and they were eliminated. Such blind and fanatical *gambari* made the war terrible. (Amanuma, 1987, pp. 67-68)

CHANGING ATTITUDES TOWARD GAMBARI

The concept of *gambari* is now changing, and the expression is losing much of its traditional strength, especially among the young. According to many recent criticisms, Japanese children today are lacking in patience because they have often been spoiled and given all that they want by their parents and grandparents. According to the *Asahi Daily*, the recent problem of *gakkyū hōkai* (collapse of the classroom) is becoming increasingly serious:

Teachers cannot control students anymore. The children, especially in elementary school, often disobey, use violent language to their teachers, chatter loudly, and walk around during class. Decent classes cannot be carried out in such situations. In a certain city in Tokyo, two-thirds of elementary schools are said to be suffering from this problem. ("Collapse of the classroom," 1998, p. 17)

To make matters worse, this impatience among children causes another problem, absenteeism (*tōkō kyohi*). According to surveys done by the Ministry of Education, the number of permanent absentees in Japanese primary and junior high schools is reaching 150,000 at present and is continuing to increase yearly. Some people say that such students do not have the ability to *gambaru*, and if people around them encourage them by saying "*gambare*," they tend to withdraw and go into their shells (Amanuma, 1987, p. 84). However, Velisarios argues that changing social conditions are more relevant to understanding these phenomena:

In classrooms across Japan, the future is something most kids would rather ignore. Thanks to a rigorous system of advancement based on tests, about 80 percent of all Japanese students are losers by the age of 15. They are the ones who do not pass exams to enter top-tier high schools. By extension, this kills their dreams of attending a good university and building a distinguished, white-collar career. In the past, working-class kids could look forward to decent jobs on graduation. Today, with Japan's economy shrinking and unemployment among young adults approaching 10 percent, many average students see little point to staying in class. (Velisarios, 1998, p. 16)

In Japan today, people are beginning to think that it is important to have more leisure time. Recently, a five-day workweek has become more common, and a standard five-day school week will also be instituted from 2002, with the Ministry of Education deciding to reduce the content of study in elementary and junior high schools ("Education in relaxation," 1998, p. 1). Thus, people continue to work hard, but they also think that it is good to have free time,

resulting in significant changes taking place in the Japanese attitude toward *gambari*.

DISCUSSION ACTIVITIES

Exploring Japanese Culture

1. There is no doubt that *gambari* is one of the main factors that has contributed to the rapid economic development of Japan, especially in rebuilding the country after World War II. But do young Japanese people work hard for the country today with a feeling of *gambari*?
2. *Gambari* still seems to be important in Japanese companies, but what is its place in the educational sector, especially among university students and professors? Are they really practicing *gambari* these days to raise educational standards and institute much-needed reforms? Discuss this issue.
3. Recently, a court decision was handed down making a company, which had pressured an employee to work so hard that he committed suicide due to overwork and fatigue, responsible for these actions, and it had to pay a large amount of money in compensation to the bereaved family. Do you think that Japanese companies will change their working environments in the future to discourage employees from working too hard, a policy that sometimes results in death in Japan?
4. Recently, students who *gambaru* have not been treated with respect, and if they study hard, they are called *gari-ben*, which has a negative meaning in Japanese. Does this indicate that the spirit of *gambari* is changing in Japan?
5. In Japan, is the present dilution of the *gambare* spirit viewed as a good thing, as it may reduce death from overwork (*karōshi*), or as a bad thing, as seen in the phenomenon of classroom collapse (*gakkyū hōkai*) in Japanese schools?

6. As the structure of Japanese society continues to change, with more women in the workplace, will *gambari* weaken because it is difficult for family life if everyone works excessive hours, or will it strengthen in response to increased competition for top jobs?

7. Is *gambari* essentially the product of Japan's homogenous, group-oriented society? In other words, because of the homogeneity of Japanese society, people can only be differentiated on the basis of effort, rather than ability. Discuss this issue.

8. In Japan, there are many men who die from overwork or who are transferred to locations where they must live apart from their families for long periods of time. Why do they accept these kinds of situations?

9. What are the roots of the Japanese sense of *gambari*?

10. Do you think that the concept of *gambari* places unrealistic pressures on Japanese people to constantly do their best? Discuss this with reference to the increasing numbers of suicides in Japan resulting from a sense of failure or inadequacy.

11. **Case Study:** Katsunori Nakamura worked very hard for his company all his life. He left his home early every morning and did not return home until late most nights. He also worked on weekends or was so tired that he slept all day. He did not see much of his children as they were growing up, because he led a life that was dedicated to his company and quite separate from that of his wife. When he retired, however, he did not know what to do with his free time and constantly irritated his wife, who was not used to him staying home all day. Instead of his retirement being a reward for a lifetime of hard work, it became a nightmare and eventually led to divorce and the breakup of his family.

Question: How common is this kind of situation in Japan? How is it related to *gambari*? What can be done to remedy the problems caused by *gambari*?

Exploring Cross-Cultural Issues

1. In the last Olympic Games, Japanese athletes did reasonably well in spite of the tremendous pressure the nation put on them, which has often caused them to underperform in the past. Do you think that today's young people are becoming indifferent to such *gambari* pressure? What are the incentives for the athletes of other countries to do well in the Olympic Games? How are these incentives different from those in Japan?

2. Is *gambari* seen as an asset by international companies that hire Japanese workers (e.g., dedication), or as a liability (e.g., exhaustion)?

3. In Japan, because of the social pressures associated with *gambari*, once someone becomes employed by a company full-time, it is very difficult for that person to take a long holiday with pay. What is the situation in other countries?

4. Compare the use of free time in Japan with that in other countries.

5. Do you think the concept of *gambari* is admired and respected by people in other nations?

6. *Gambari* (studying and working hard) is sometimes said to be one of the most important virtues of the Japanese. What are similar virtues in other countries of the world?