

THE JAPANESE MIND

*Understanding Contemporary
Japanese Culture*

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in these areas was expected of all women. This practice is called *hanayome-shugyō*, or “good wife training.” In later life, she says that these skills have become the basis of her hobbies, which contribute greatly to her enjoyment of life. With all the changes that are occurring in Japanese society, she wonders if there is anything wrong with this.

Question: How would you answer Kiyomi? Is *hanayome-shugyō* still practiced in modern Japan? Should it be?

Exploring Cross-Cultural Issues

1. A great many foreign firms are entering Japan these days, and this influx is expected to increase in the future. These companies are reported to be particularly interested in hiring young Japanese women, who generally work harder than young men at university and who often have superior communication skills, especially in foreign languages. Moreover, these firms will usually give these women the opportunity to have a genuine career if they have the necessary qualifications and abilities, in contrast to traditional Japanese companies, which generally force young women into “office lady” positions in which they spend most of their time serving tea and making photocopies. Discuss this issue.

2. More women in Western countries work outside the home, but the divorce rate in these countries is also much higher than in Japan, where women traditionally stay at home and raise their children. Which system do you think is better?

3. How do women in countries other than Japan cope with the responsibilities of work, household tasks, and childrearing?

4. Compare maternity-leave practices and equal employment opportunity laws in Japan with those in other countries.

5. What are the social expectations of women in other countries? How do they compare with those in Japan? Are there stereotypes that women are expected to conform to? What is the image of a “good wife and wise mother” in other countries?

先輩 / 後輩

Sempai-Kōhai:

SENIORITY RULES IN JAPANESE RELATIONS

There are many special aspects to Japanese culture, and in particular, human relationships are quite different from those in the West. Many scholars in social anthropology have discussed these differences, a typical example of which is Nakane (1967, pp. 70-71):

Human relationships can be classified into vertical and horizontal hierarchies. The vertical includes relationships between parents and their children, while the horizontal involves classmates or colleagues. In Japanese society vertical rankings of human relationships have developed to a great extent and a seniority system is prevalent in Japan.

Horizontal relationships in Japan are expressed by words such as *dōryō* and *dōkyusei*. The former is used by businesspeople and refers to colleagues or those who are in the same position in a company, while the latter is a term used by students for classmates or those who are the same age. Such horizontal relationships are not the norm in Japanese society, however, and vertical hierarchies dominate. *Sempai-kōhai* relationships exemplify this kind of hierarchy. Seniors are called *sempai* in Japanese, a term that has a long history, first appearing in ancient Chinese texts, where it referred to people who are older or superior in ability. In contemporary Japanese, *sempai* is also used to refer to those who graduated earlier from the same

school. *Kōhai* is the opposite of *sempai*: *kō* means "later" or "afterwards," and *hai* signifies "fellows" or "mates." So people who are junior or who entered the same school or company after oneself are called *kōhai* and are considered to be inferior to *sempai* because of their lack of experience. This expression can also be found in ancient texts and is used in the same way today.

Nakane (*ibid.*, pp. 82–83) argues that "the Japanese tend to make too much of rank even in daily life; for example, people can neither be seated nor talk without considering the status and seniority of the other people around them." At schools and companies, seniors believe that it is natural to be respected by juniors because they are experienced in their jobs or other activities. In Japanese companies, in particular, people put more emphasis on age than ability because the system of wages and promotions is based on seniority rules. The older people become, the more they earn or the greater their chances for promotion. Such seniority rules have deeply permeated all aspects of Japanese life.

THE HISTORY OF SEMPAL-KŌHAI

Sempai-kōhai relationships have existed since the beginning of Japanese history, but three main formative influences on this ranking of human relations need to be considered: Confucianism, the traditional Japanese family system, and the former civil law.

Confucianism was originally imported to Japan from China from the sixth to ninth centuries but had its greatest impact on the Japanese way of thinking as neo-Confucianism, which became the official doctrine of the Tokugawa shogunate. At this time, the precept of *chō-kō*, or loyalty and filial piety, dominated Japanese thinking:

Confucianism's concern with social conduct within a concrete human nexus fit well with Japanese values which placed primary importance on particularistic human relationships within a strictly-defined social hierarchy. Filial piety, respect for one's elders, and reverence for one's ancestors also suited native Japanese preferences. The present-day emphasis in Japanese life on education, diligence, and historical precedent (i.e., accumulated knowledge from the past as opposed to intellectual debate) all owe much to

Confucian influences. Nevertheless, as with other imported traditions, the Japanese adopted Confucian ideals and institutions selectively; thus, 'loyalty' in the Confucian sense became synonymous with loyalty to one's lord and later to the emperor. (Davies, 1998; after Reischauer, 1988; Nakamura, 1971)

The *ie*, or family, system also had an influence on the development of seniority rules. The family system, which was largely based on Confucian codes of conduct, had two main principles: the father, as chief male, had absolute power in the family, and the eldest son inherited the family estate. The father was considered the family ruler because he had received an education and had superior ethical wisdom. Paying reverence to superiors was considered a virtue in Japanese society, so his wife and children had to obey him. Moreover, in the inheritance system, only the eldest son had the right to inherit at that time—neither the eldest daughter nor any younger children could succeed to the father's estate.

In addition to Confucianism and the family system, the former civil law, which was brought into effect in 1898, strengthened seniority rules and reinforced the traditional Japanese family system, as hierarchical values within the family were given a clear definition. This was called *koshu-sei*, meaning "the system of the head of a family," which stated that the master of the house had the right to rule his family and that the eldest son succeeded to this position and to his father's estate. These statutes were overturned in 1947 but continue to have a powerful psychological influence on the Japanese way of thinking.

SEMPAL-KŌHAI AND THE JAPANESE LANGUAGE

Seniority rules are reflected in certain grammatical forms in the Japanese language. When people talk to superiors they use *keigo* (honorific) language, which includes three types of language: *sonkeigo* (respectful or honorific language), *kenjōgo* (humble language), and *teineigo* (polite language). *Sonkeigo* and *kenjōgo* involve particular sets of expressions, while *teineigo* is used in a more general sense. People make proper use of these forms as the situation dictates.

Sonkeigo is used when a speaker expresses respect toward an addressee or someone who is being talked about. In this kind of

speech, the position of the addressee is raised by the speaker through the use of particular honorific expressions. In *sonkeigo*, there are many special verbs. For example, people use the verb *ossharu* instead of *iu* to show respect, although both are translated as “to say”—the former carries honorific connotations, while the latter is simply the plain or neutral form of the verb. In addition, terms of respect or titles of honor such as *-san*, *-sama*, and *-sensei* are added to people’s family names or occupational titles in *sonkeigo*. The use of *-san* is neutral and can be translated as “Mr.,” “Ms.,” “Mrs.,” or “Miss,” while *-sama* has exactly the same translational meaning but is more formal or polite. *Sensei* is used for professionals such as teachers, doctors, or lawyers. In general, people can express their respect to others directly by using *sonkeigo*.

Kenjōgo is a type of speech that lowers the status of the speaker, who is thus able to communicate with humility. Speaking in this modest way thus indicates respect for one’s addressee, because to humble oneself before superiors or seniors indirectly represents high regard for them. In this kind of speech, there are also special terms such as the expression *mōsu* or *mōshiageru*, humble forms of the verb *iu*, both of which also mean “to say,” but with connotations of humility.

In addition to *sonkeigo* and *kenjōgo*, *teineigo* is a polite level of speech, using the prefixes *o-* or *go-* with nouns (e.g., *cha* is a neutral form of the noun “tea,” while *o-cha* is its polite equivalent), or the verb forms *-desu* and *-masu* (e.g., *iu* is the plain or dictionary form of the verb “to say,” and is conjugated as *iimasu* in its polite form). *Teineigo* is somewhat different from the other two types of *keigo* in that it is used not only with seniors but also with people around oneself as a way of expressing respectful politeness in a general sense. *Teineigo* is therefore commonly used in relationships among all kinds of people.

THE CURRENT STYLE OF SEMPAI-KŌHAI

Vertical hierarchies have existed since the beginning of Japanese history and are still prevalent in daily life, especially in schools, where seniority rules are important:

The relationships between *sempai* and *kōhai* are very stable among students because everyone will sooner or later be a *sempai*, *kōhai*,

or both. Spending more time and having more experience at school gives students *sempai* status. (Okazaki, 1989, pp. 190–191)

For example, third-year students have great power in junior high and senior high schools, and especially in clubs, these relationships are important. It is common in sports clubs for *kōhai* to clean the rooms, collect balls, and manage the equipment for *sempai*. They must also give a small bow or say hello respectfully to their *sempai* when greeting them. In general, students put much more emphasis on age than ability in Japanese schools, and seniority rules also influence relationships between teachers and students. Although schools are rapidly changing today, in most classes students would never criticize or talk back to a teacher. They think that teachers should be respected because of their age, experience, and ability, and what teachers say is always considered to be right. Therefore, there are few opportunities for students to have real discussions with teachers in Japanese schools.

In universities, changes in relationships among students start to take place. They express their respect and use polite expressions to seniors, but *sempai-kōhai* relationships are not as strong, because there is more variety in age among classmates. The differing status between teachers and students remains the same as in high school, but there are important differences that separate professors in terms of rank and power, and vertical hierarchies involving seniority rules are seen more among faculty than students in Japanese universities. Nakane (1967, p. 92) notes, for example, that “in London University, professors, assistant professors, and lecturers are considered colleagues, and they use first names without thinking in terms of seniority. On the other hand, there are definite vertical hierarchies in Japanese universities.”

Seniority rules in Japanese relationships are not only important at schools but also in companies in contemporary Japan. The seniority system and the lifetime employment system are the bases of life in Japanese companies, though it remains to be seen whether this structure will survive the changes that corporate Japan is currently undergoing. Status, position, and salary still depend largely on seniority, and older employees are generally in higher positions and are

paid more than their younger subordinates. Moreover, until recently, once people were employed, they never had to worry about their positions because their posts were guaranteed for life. In the business world, the *sempai-kōhai* system has a powerful influence on human relations, such as in meetings where a junior employee will take a seat near the door, which is called *shimoza*, while the eldest person (often the boss) will be seated next to any important guests in a position called *kamiza*. In most meetings, the majority of businessmen do not normally voice their opinions. They simply listen to their superiors, flatter them, or express opinions that were formulated behind the scenes by senior employees of considerable influence.

PROBLEMS IN THE SEMPAI-KŌHAI SYSTEM

Sempai-kōhai relationships have deeply permeated Japanese life, but they are starting to change in schools and business organizations. *Sempai* used to be respected by *kōhai* because of their experience, but lately *kōhai* do not express as high a regard to seniors as in the past. While they use polite expressions, respect toward seniors has become rather superficial, and today, people tend to consider age less important because there is beginning to be more variety in the student body of Japanese schools with returnee students, non-Japanese, and so on.

The breakdown of the seniority system in companies is a much more serious issue in modern Japan. The collapse of the bubble economy has caused high unemployment, and even senior executives have lost their jobs. Many companies have begun to adopt the principle of "ability first," and lay off older workers if they cannot fulfill their job responsibilities satisfactorily. There are great changes taking place in the whole structure of Japanese companies, especially in the salary system, with some companies opting for a pay system in which people who are talented and productive can earn more money, regardless of age. It is widely believed that most companies will have to reform their entire corporate structures involving salaries and promotion sooner or later, and this will inevitably lessen the influence of seniority rules in Japanese society as a whole.

DISCUSSION ACTIVITIES

Exploring Japanese Culture

1. What are the advantages and disadvantages of vertical hierarchies such as *sempai-kōhai* for Japanese society? Discuss this issue in relation to business, education, and family life.
2. In Japan, *sempai-kōhai* relationships are starting to change, and some companies are adopting the principle of "ability first," in place of seniority. How will these changes affect the Japanese corporate world?
3. In Japanese schools, especially in clubs, senior students (*sempai*) have great power over those who are younger (*kōhai*). In most cases, *sempai* exercise this power responsibly, but in some circumstances, it can lead to bullying, physical abuse, and even death. Discuss this issue and suggest remedies for the negative effects of *sempai-kōhai*.
4. Relationships in Japanese families are also based on a vertical hierarchy in which older siblings play the role of *sempai* and younger siblings that of *kōhai*. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of this way of relating within the family.
5. **Case Study:** Yoshi Murata is the junior member of his company's section, and for three years since he graduated from university, he has been serving drinks to his colleagues at meetings, photocopying materials for his superiors, and generally doing all the low-level work in his office. He is not happy about this situation, but he believes that if he carries out his responsibilities well, in two or three years he will be able to do the kind of work he really wants.
Question: If you were Yoshi, would you accept this situation? Do you think that this is an appropriate way for a company to operate in the modern world? How are the expectations of younger employees changing in Japan these days?

Exploring Cross-Cultural Issues

1. In Japan, people are often ranked by age, which is a kind of hierarchy within society that is reflected in *sempai-kōhai* relationships. In what ways are people ranked in other countries?
2. Why does the concept of seniority seem to be less important in Western societies than in Japan? Discuss this notion in relation to other Asian societies.
3. In Japan, *kōhai* are expected to use polite language (*keigo*) when speaking to *sempai*, and if they do not, they will be severely reprimanded. Do other languages of the world have similar respect systems based on seniority? Compare this with ways in which politeness and respect are expressed to older people in other societies.
4. Do you think the concept of *sempai-kōhai* enhances or hinders Japan's international business practices? Discuss its ramifications for multinational companies.
5. In the West, especially in modern times, egalitarian modes of discourse have become widely accepted, and people are generally expected to communicate with one another as equals regardless of their actual status in society. Discuss this approach to communication in relation to vertical hierarchies such as *sempai-kōhai*, which continue to dominate in Japan.

集団意識

Shūdan Ishiki:

JAPANESE GROUP CONSCIOUSNESS

In Japanese society, people are primarily group-oriented and give more priority to group harmony than to individuals. Most Japanese consider it an important virtue to adhere to the values of the groups to which they belong. This loyalty to the group produces a feeling of solidarity, and the underlying concept of group consciousness is seen in diverse aspects of Japanese life. In Japan, group members create their own social codes of behavior, and group consciousness has become the foundation of Japanese society. The development of non-verbal communication, the distinction between *uchi* and *soto*, and emphasis on harmony, have all had an influence on the distinct group consciousness of the Japanese.

Nonverbal communication in Japan is a typical example. Unlike in Western countries, Japan is a society in which conciliatory, cooperative attitudes are more highly valued than strong, unyielding insistence. So Japanese people manipulate *honne* (what is intended) and *tatemae* (what is said), depending on the situation. Sometimes speech is unnecessary, and even silence can be seen as a means of communication. In contrast, if people carelessly and directly express what they really think, there is the probability of hurting the feelings of others, disrupting the group ambience, or destroying harmonious relations. Many Japanese proverbs admonish against speaking carelessly; for example, "Out of the mouth comes evil" (*Kuchi wa wazawai no moto*) or "Silence is golden" (*Iwanu ga hana*).