

The philosopher Nakajima Yoshimichi has just published a new book titled “Japan the Ugly, and Myself.” Nakajima, a self-described “fighting philosopher,” continues to condemn the noise and dirtiness that inundate Japanese society all the time. In his new book, Nakajima lambasts the disorderly townscapes in Japan, citing various examples with photographs. As he points out, Japanese towns, with messy overhead electric lines obscuring the sky and garish billboards of various shapes lining shopping districts, are ugly indeed.

The title of Nakajima’s book is a parody of the titles of speeches given by Japanese Nobel laureate writers Kawabata Yasunari and Oe Kenzaburo at their Nobel Prize ceremonies. Kawabata’s speech in 1968 was titled “Japan the Beautiful, and Myself,” and Oe’s speech in 1994 was titled “Japan the Ambiguous, and Myself.” Nakajima explains that the adjective “Ugly” in the title of his book modifies both “Japan” and “Myself.”

His combative reputation stems from the fact that not only does he condemn ugliness in writing but goes so far as to rebuke people for ugliness in their teeth and demand far-reaching improvements to the environment. Such action causes friction in Japan. And, despite all the fuss he makes, it seldom translates into any actual improvement.

A man like Nakajima, who belongs to a tiny minority, tends to be

Recently I politely asked at the passenger service center of a major private railway company why in-train announcements are made so tediously. A lady in charge replied apologetically, “There are various types of passengers, and we have to serve all of them.” The current in-train announcement service resulted from the acceptance of various demands from passengers, she explained. I was surprised to hear that passengers demand so many services.

An example of one such demand that has been discretely catered to is a modification of the color coding of subway lines in Tokyo. Until a few years ago, the subway lines were represented by colored circles on signs. But a scientist with color blindness thought that people like himself may find themselves hard-pressed to discern different lines with color-coded circles alone. So the man, Ito Kei, from the Institute of Molecular and Cellular Biosciences of the University of Tokyo, prevailed upon subway company officials to add a Roman letter to each circle, so that those for the Ginza Line have a “G”, and so on. Few passengers have noticed the change. But Ito emphasizes that this is an important point. He explains that had the improvement been done in a noticeable way, it would have met with objection from the general public. This is an example of respecting the strength of the majority’s sensibility, he points out.

In the postscript of his book, Nakajima attributed the rampancy of bullying in Japanese schools to the “overwhelming power of peo-

People’s Sensibilities

By Ogata Shinichi

labeled as an obstinate, uncooperative eccentric and dismissed as a nuisance. Yet, that doesn’t dissuade him from his protests, perhaps reflecting the degree to which other people’s actions get under his skin.

It may be that even if he wanted to stop it, his indignation at the slings and arrows of daily life would prevent him from doing so. Though I am not so sensitive as he is, I too am sometimes irritated by what others unconcernedly put up with, at least ostensibly.

An example that comes to mind is the announcements made in commuting trains during the morning and evening rush hours. As soon as passengers get on a train, they are told by an in-train announcement to mind the closing doors. Then, they are alerted, “The doors on the left side will open. Please mind your step.” When they get off, they are advised to be careful not to leave belongings behind. Instructions are given regarding every conceivable action passengers take while in the train.

It is true that some passengers on their way home appreciate the sentiment of such in-train announcements as “We wish you a good evening”. In fact, I myself missed the friendly nature of such announcements in Japanese trains when having trouble changing trains while touring Europe or America. While I am not so arrogant as to consider my own sensibility the only true and orthodox one, I wonder if such announcements need to be so gratuitous.

ple’s sensibilities.” “In Japan, each person is desperately trying to adjust his sensibility to that of the majority. I wonder when this country can get out of the fascism of sensibility,” he lamented. I feel empathy with him in many respects.

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Photo: Tokyo Metro Co.



Besides the traditional color coding system, Tokyo subway lines are now also identified by their first letter on signs to assist people with color blindness. Shown here are signs for the Yurakucho and Namboku lines.

Ogata Shinichi is Chief Editor, Cultural News Section, Kyodo News.