

A Message for the Understanding of Japanese Culture

By Wang Min

IT can be said that there is a culture peculiar to Japan and it is particularly notable when it comes to arts and lifestyle.* This is the view of Zhou Zuoren (1885-1967), a Chinese researcher on Japanese culture. Lu Xun, his elder brother, who is known as the father of modern Chinese literature, was the eldest of the three brothers, and his real name was Zhou Shuren. Zuoren studied in Japan for more than five years beginning in 1906. "If one wants to see through to the heart of Japan... there is no better way than to observe how the Japanese drink tea, or fiddle around with flowers. In my own view, the strong point of the national character of the Japanese... lies in the Japanese sensitivity to human sensibilities." I feel that this characteristic of the Japanese has been splendidly described in detail by Zhou Zuoren, who was captivated by Japanese culture.

When foreigners live in Japan, they are more likely to experience culture shock, a sense of discomfort or heterogeneity. They may soon notice that the country and its culture

have a unique essence, but not everyone can ascertain where this uniqueness came from, or what it actually is.

Let's take the example of the Japanese custom called *ichirin-zashi* or a single flower base. When you are invited to a Japanese home, you may see an *ichirin-zashi* with a single seasonal flower in it, placed casually on the shoebox at the entrance.

They are also placed in the bathroom. There are times when there are not only one but two or

three flowers, but this is certainly an accessory that has become a habit in the homes of Japanese.

When many Chinese see this custom, they may feel that it looks shabby. In Chinese homes, it is common practice to put many flowers in as large a vase as possible to create a luxurious feeling. The idea is that beauty lies in splendor. Imagine the Great Wall of China, for instance, a piece of historical heritage. The Chinese find beauty in the endless long wall built along the frontiers. They value a beauty that dominates its surroundings.

I once asked a Japanese acquaintance about the custom of *ichirin-zashi*. At first she did not understand the significance of the question and was flustered, but then she responded: "It is just a little accent which enriches daily life. Just a single flower by itself is beautiful enough. I think that the spirit of enjoying its beauty is what matters." I felt that I had come to understand the starting point of the tender-heartedness and consideration of the Japanese, in a simple *ichirin-zashi* in the home.

I was also surprised at how Japanese walk with their dogs which dressed in beautiful clothes. One can easily recognize the dog's gender by its clothing. The scene of pet dogs that are dolled up as if they were in a stylish fashion competition playing with one another is heart-warming. Japan even has hairdresser's salons for pets. I feel that devoting affection to pets in the same manner as to one's own family represents the heart of the Japanese people.

There was a key moment when I first noticed this spirit of the Japanese through a *fude-zuka* (writing brush mound), and *unagi-zuka* (eel mound), at folk Shinto shrines. I had already been living in Japan for a few years, but still felt a bit out of step among Japanese people. After entering the shrine grounds and offering prayers, I looked

around and found the *fude-zuka*, a memorial stone 1m high in the corner where an old grove created a solemn atmosphere. I asked my Japanese companion, "Why is this kind of thing here?"

Fude is a tool used when writing characters or for calligraphy which is indispensable when using Chinese ink, though, nowadays people generally use ballpoint pens. It is said that the Japanese have a custom of thanking and honoring worn out *fude*. There is also something called a *hari-zuka*, or needle mound. Women used to bring worn-out or broken sewing needles to honor them there. In addition, Japanese like to eat eels as a protein source. There are even Midsummer Days of the Ox when they all consume eels in the hot summer, a time when people lack appetite. Japanese probably have a sense of guilt of eating so many eels at one time, so they create eel mounds to commemorate the day. It also seems that eel dish restaurant owners express their gratitude to the eel for their livelihoods.

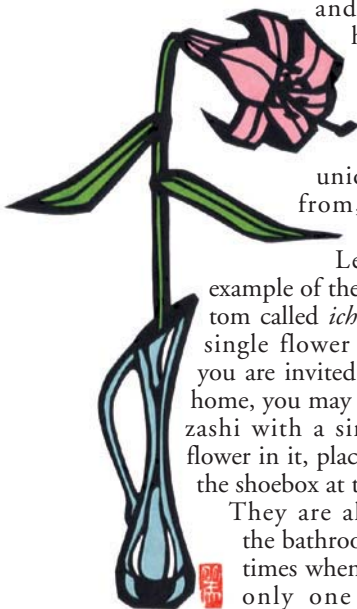
Viewed from the standpoint of cuisine culture, China, whose people are renowned for eating anything, it is only natural that eels are eaten by human beings. China is the place where there is even a saying to the effect that "anything with four legs other than a chair and anything that flies other than an airplane is food." They even eat poisonous scorpions. In general, Chinese are strangers to the notion of expressing gratitude to the things that we eat.

For the first time, I had tasted the feeling of noticing the spirit of the Japanese, who do not forget to express gratitude for nature's bounty.

"Some day in the future, the Japanese may build memorial mounds for computers, too!"

When I said this, my acquaintance responded in the affirmative with a laugh. I take this seriously, though, and

*Note : Zhou Zuoren, *Nihon Dangishu* (translated by Motoyama Hideo), Heibonsha, Toyo Bunko 701.



imagine that such a mound has already been built somewhere in this IT era.

During the period of rule by warriors in Japan in the 16th century, when the various military leaders contended for hegemony over the warring states, and the army of Takeda Shingen, who ruled a secluded mountainous region, was in dire straits since the route for sea salt had been cut, the rival general Uesugi Kenshin offered a helping hand. Since Uesugi governed a fiefdom that was situated on the seashore, he sent Takeda salt, which his territory produced in large quantities. This is the historical basis for the Japanese saying “sending salt to one’s enemy.” Not forgetting compassion for one’s enemy even when one is at loggerheads with him is a cause for glory in Japan. It teaches us that being superior in the art of warfare is not all it takes to be a great general. In the 12th century, an invasion was launched against Japan by the Yuan Dynasty, which had constructed a global empire. A typhoon attacked the fierce onslaught of the Yuan army, which had descended on Japan with a huge armada of some 200,000 men, and Japan avoided occupation by the Yuan. When almost all the Yuan army had drowned and lost their lives, Hojo Tokimune, who was the ruler of the Kamakura Shogunate at the time, constructed the Engakuji temple and mourned the dead, without distinction between friend and foe. This was called the notion of “equality of enmity and kindred feeling.” This is an aspect of the Japanese mind that we Chinese cannot understand, given our long history founded on the contrasting idea of “ceremonies to honor the war dead.”

The unhappy history of the war has produced bad blood between Japan and China. There have been a series of recent events that have soured relations between the two countries in the fields of politics and diplomacy. What should be done about this? I feel that Japan has no choice but to rebuild the image of the Japanese people.

Takakura Ken, the famous Japanese actor, has contributed to the current

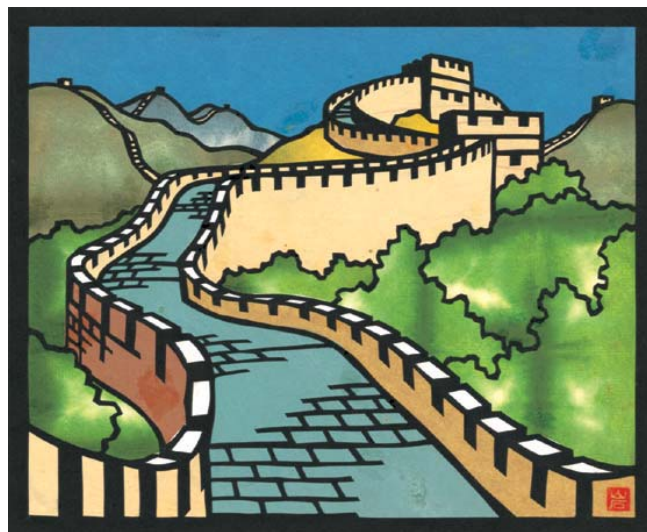
Japan-China relations. He is so popular in China that he has become one of the Japanese whose name the Chinese cite most often. The latest film by the Chinese director Zhang Yimou, *Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles*, stars Takakura. It has been tremendously popular, and people lining up in front of theaters for the film have become a topic of conversation. Takakura plays the role of a father full of humaneness and brings viewers to tears with his performance.

There is no question that the film has resulted in a good impression of Japanese people.

Takakura’s name was engraved in the minds of Chinese about 30 years ago. When the Great Cultural Revolution ended in 1977, people turned their concern to the previously forbidden culture of advanced countries, and rushed to watch Japanese films in particular, though one cannot overlook the fact that movies were the king of entertainment in the country at that time. Of these movies, people were especially fascinated with Takakura’s films such as *Kimi yo Fundo no Kawa wo Watare*, screened in 1978. They were drawn to the taciturn Takakura, who grapples with hardship in his role. Chinese flocked to see films starring Takakura such as *Haruka naru Yama no Yobigoe* (A Distant Cry from Spring) and *Shiawase no Kiiroi Hankachi* (The Yellow Handkerchief of Happiness). They learned the image of a considerate and honest Japanese in these films.

Up to that point, the only image that Chinese had of the Japanese was that of a belligerent race that had invaded China. The war leaders symbolized by Tojo Hideki were the sole image of

Illustrations: Iwasawa Akio



Japanese depicted by the Chinese.

Takakura provided a different image of Japanese among the Chinese, instead of a negative one. Owing to Takakura, there were many Chinese who felt empathy for the first time towards Japanese people, and their image of the Japanese changed completely. It is no exaggeration to say that he was an opportunity for many Chinese to take a new look at the Japanese. We must not forget one more such famous Japanese actress, namely Yamaguchi Momoe, who played innocent and pretty women. The Chinese came to know her as the heroine of the TV drama *Akai Giwaku* (Red Suspicion). In any survey about “Japanese that I know and like” in China, she is always competing for the first place along with Takakura.

I think that what Japan has been lacking is a message that conveys the heart of Japan. Japan should make an effort to transmit the kindness, compassion and consideration that converge in the Japanese way of life.

I believe the fact that the works of Zhou Zuoren are being reissued one after another in China is a bright sign for the understanding of Japan. **JS**

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