

# Grassroots Change?

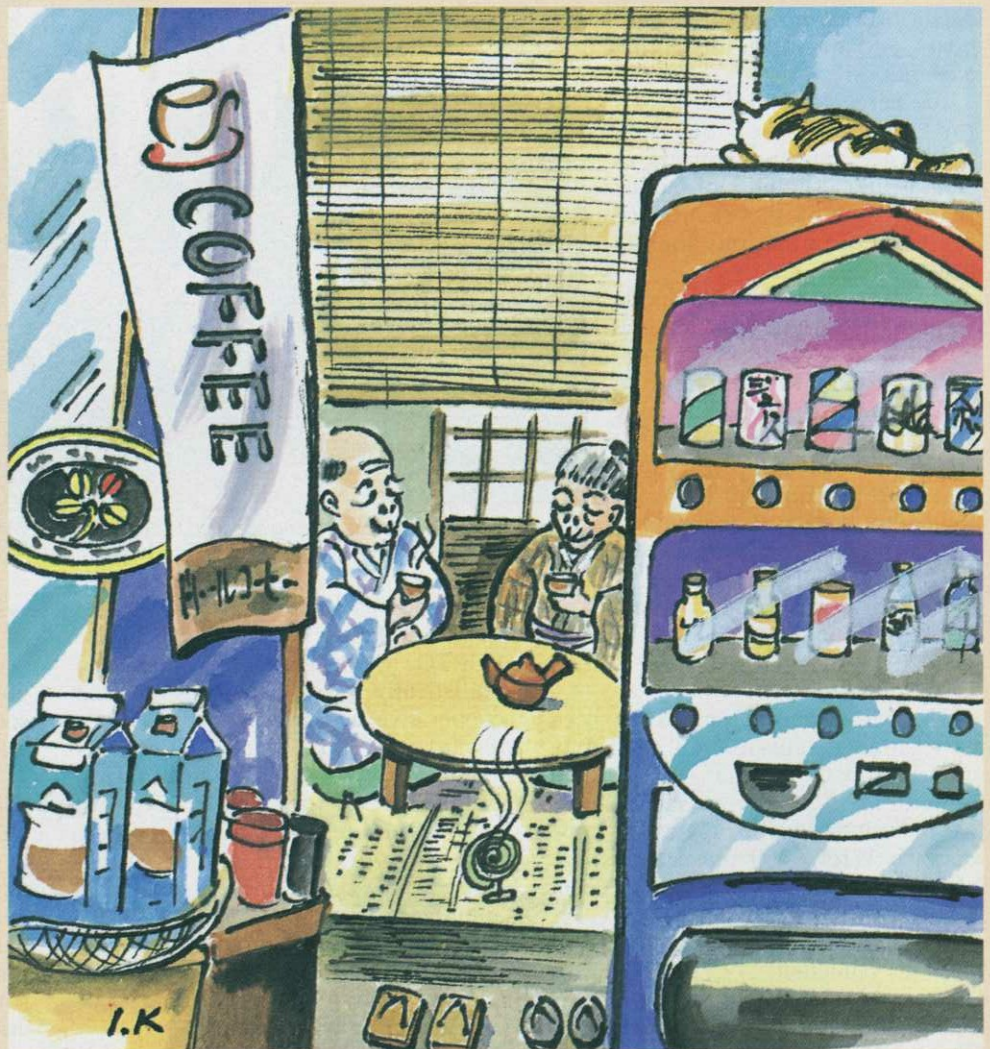
Article by Elizabeth Kiritani and illustrations by Kiritani Itsuo

Japan is teeming with contradictions. Its subway systems run on precise time schedules, almost to the second. A visit to the doctor, on the other hand, requires hours of waiting: there is no medical appointment system at most hospitals. Known for its fine computers, fully developed bar code systems, and just-in-time deliveries, Japan is home to many small shops that are still using the abacus for their calculations.

The most surprising contradictions that I've experienced in Japan involve this juxtaposition of the oldest of the old with the newest of the new. Japanese-style umbrellas, made of paper, bamboo and oil, have made way for more durable and practical nylon western-style types. Yet, the custom of hanging the umbrellas out to dry after a rain — essential to the preservation of paper umbrellas — remains, an unnecessary vestige of past custom. After a rain, multi-colored umbrellas hang from the eaves of homes all over the old sections of Tokyo, like newly sprouted, oversized morning glories.

Another delightful juxtaposition is the survival of the ancient tea ceremony alongside the hot tea vending machines and coffee chains like Starbucks and Dotour. The former is a celebration of taking one's time to calm the mind by watching the preparation and participating in the ritualized imbibing of a small bowl of tea; the latter provide a beverage on the run, meant to jolt the mind awake.

In Japan old rituals are not easily thrown out; at the same time, new gimmicks and customs are not easily rejected. There is a surge toward two



extremes: one to stick to the tried-and-true and the other to grab everything new at its most modern.

Open arms toward the new, however, seem mainly focused on technology, fashion and new products. This love of new goods, itself, is not a new trait, but one that thrived in Edo period (1603-1868) Japan, where the commoners were enthralled with the newest fashions and trends, and the government constantly legislated

against their lavish consumption. Later, when Japan was striving to westernize, men in kimono often wore fedora hats. But when you really examine things closely, it seems that apart from stylistic trends, fundamental change is slow to take hold in Japan.

In the United States, the basic attitude toward change is positive. Perhaps because the U.S. was founded on revolution, the nuance of change,

for the American, is improvement. The idea of change is connected with prosperity, enjoyment and progress. Thus, the U.S. can react rather quickly to world events and disasters. Changing the system, making exceptions is something that is, quite the opposite from Japan, rooted in our culture.

For many Japanese change is something to be avoided as much as possible. Flashy new fads and products are one thing, but real change in this age-based hierarchical society is looked at askance. Confucian tenets of organization and precedent still hold influence, especially with those in power. But even more influential may be the negative nuance embedded into the kanji character used to express "change" in the Japanese language itself.

The kanji character for change is a character with a nasty edge. This kanji for "kawaru" is the same kanji that is used for statements like "hen na gaijin," strange (and distasteful) foreigner, and "henshin," change of mind, which have extremely negative meanings. With this pejorative nuance built into the word for change — probably reflecting ideas of feudal Japan — it is no wonder that the gut reaction to even the thought of change is still that of discomfort and unease. In the Japanese kanji for change lies the implication that things will probably get worse, certainly not better. This negative nuance may be behind the slowness with which decisions are made and basic changes are put into effect. There is an aura of pessimism about change — reluctance and a fear.

How different is the U.S. climate that extols change — changes of companies, changes of partners, changes of body parts through cosmetic surgery even. Once a new program is thought of, little seems to get in the way of reviving it up. If it doesn't work, it is quickly abandoned and something else is tried.

Although the Japanese system is against real, fundamental change,

the Japanese people themselves are getting fed up with its hidebound stagnation. Still another non-party politician won the Tokyo gubernatorial race in April, 1999. The public seems to be trying to force change upon a reluctant bureaucracy and rusty political system by refusing to support established political parties. Whereas politicians and bureaucrats aren't ready for genuine change, especially concerning their own power, the average Tokyoite has been consistently voting for change for the past several elections.

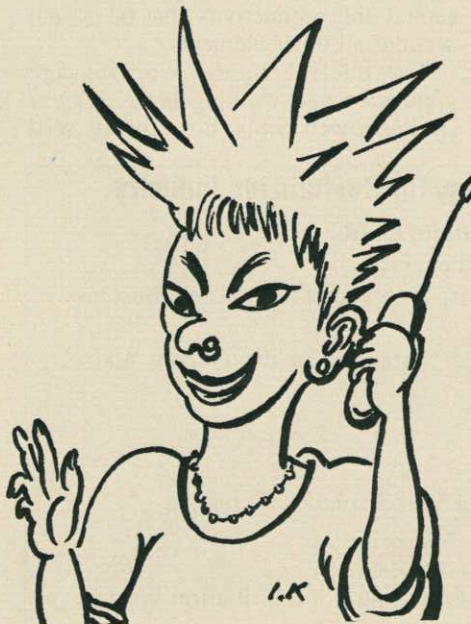
The conundrum is difficult to grasp: in Japan change is no change; and no change may be change. New suburban towns bring a large community with similar economic, educational and political values together. Most contain exclusive populations of businessmen and their families or all elderly; all middle class; all wealthy, etc. in one newly built area. This lack of variety in residents is new — a big change. Change in Japan has brought sameness to the new communities. Whereas various different Japanese — artisans, writers, actors, businessmen and so forth once lived side by side — in the

new towns a dull sameness dominates. There is little to share and competition on a materialistic level flourishes. The change, the creation of modern housing, in these neighborhoods — and that they were all built at once — is not new, but the result is very new in Japan; that of isolation and lack of variety and communication.

New towns have little of the vitality, ritual or warmth of the old communities. And their men are largely absent, making them ghost towns in the afternoons and evenings.

That the youth of Japan also desperately seek change is reflected in a riot of wild styles, neon-colored hairdos and body piercings. They want to shock; they want to appear like individuals, yet the movement is in a group. Change is upon Japan: but it is a change that is timeless. The Edo period thrived with superficial change, as did the Meiji and Taisho periods thereafter. Change is in the genes of the Japanese, but this love of change is largely limited to that of outward presentation. Fundamentally, those in power are against anything that might change the status quo.

Yet, a new-sprung longing for meaningful change seems to be emerging from grassroots movements all over the country. Citizens are demanding referendums on nuclear energy plants, dams and incinerators. Actions aimed at protecting the environment such as stopping large-scale construction projects and by initiating recycling networks have recently caught the interest of the average citizen. Whether the majority can budge the obdurate, age-based system in power, however, is a question yet to be answered. JJI



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