

A Love of Work?

By Patricia Massy

"Before I came to Japan I thought everyone worked hard, but that's not true. I work harder than any of the other girls," pouted Linda upon returning from her after-school job washing dishes in a posh Chinese restaurant. Having a Japanese father, she had heard in her homeland Peru how industrious the Japanese were. This was only one of the myths that were shattered by her experiences here.

"And as for studying," she continued heatedly, "most of the students couldn't hold a light to the kids in Peru. They come late, they don't do their homework, they jabber away in class – we'd never get away with behavior like that."

I gave a sad nod. Visions of the insipid faces in the junior high school where I had once taught floated before me. It wasn't just a dislike of school that drained their expressions. Many of the boys and girls I'd see shopping downtown had similar dull eyes and sluggish attitude. Because the only incentive to exert themselves at all was to make some personal spending money, I could well imagine that they would do as little as possible.

It hadn't always been that way.

Clean Now, Eat Later

It was the spring of 1969. At the invitation of a young woman my age who had been studying with me at a *yuzen* (a process of dyeing kimono) studio in Kyoto, I went to visit her family in Shiroishi, a small town near Sendai, Miyagi Prefecture, in the north of Japan. Although her ancestors had been the feudal lords of this area, her family lived frugally in an old house that had belonged to one of the samurai. Ume and her sister had no room of their own. They slept in the *kotatsu* room right by the front entrance, and that's where I slept with them, like

three mice in a tiny box. The first thing in the morning as soon as we had jumped out of our *futon*, we opened the dozen or so sliding glass doors and then, dusters and brooms in hand, cleaned out the whole house. That done, while their father paid his respects to the family shrine and the Buddhist altar, we merrily proceeded to make breakfast. Cleaning, cooking, scrubbing, making bread, fashioning new clothes out of old ones, sewing old *kimono* fabric into drawstring bags, weaving – the sisters constantly busied themselves, attacking even the meanest chore with a hearty laugh. Joy was found in every aspect of their life, and each moment was something to be cherished. Mishaps and misfortunes were to be faced with dry eyes and determination, as if they comprised just a sideline of the amusing business of living.

Reeling and Spinning

My work writing about Japan's traditional crafts for the *Japan Times* took me in 1982 to Kumejima, a small island one hour distant by plane from the main island of Okinawa. There the dyeing and weaving of a floss silk fabric called *Kumejima tsumugi* has been one of the mainstays of the economy for several hundred years. In the course of my research, I met a remarkable woman in her sixties, Kamisato-san.

Her winters were reserved for the arduous labor of harvesting sugar cane. The rest of the year she spent gathering the roots and leaves for her dyes, raising silk worms, spinning the silk, dyeing it, and finally doing the weaving. As if that were not enough to keep her occupied, she also raised pigs and goats



Reeling silk was a chore that many of the women on the Ryukyuan island of Kumejima accepted with enthusiasm

and grew the vegetables for her kitchen. She was in the process of reeling the silk when I called upon her.

Sitting on a discarded wooden chair from the local elementary school, with the iron cauldron full of boiling cocoons to her right and the reeling machine to her left, she picked up the filaments of the cocoons and guided them onto the reeling device as gracefully as if she were practicing the movements of an Okinawan dance. From time to time she stopped to add more wood to the fire or to take out the spent cocoons. The pupas served as fertilizer for the sugar cane fields. Despite the intense heat, she chatted brightly about her plans to learn new weaving techniques, oblivious to the fact that she had already grossly overloaded her daily working hours.

Perhaps she didn't even think of it as work – to her all this must have seemed as naturally a part of life as eating and sleeping.

Work as a fact of life was instilled early among the island women. At a Kumejima *minshuku*, the Japanese equivalent of a B&B with dinner included, I discovered another superwoman: the teenage daughter of the establishment. Before going off to high school, she provided the six boarders with a boxed lunch as well as their breakfast. Returning in the afternoon, she cleaned the rooms, helped make the supper, and also managed to do her homework. Her contribution to the family business allowed her mother to remain busy at the loom.

Be what they say about Japanese men as the backbone of the economy, without women like Ume and her sister, Kamisato-san and the *minshuku* keeper's daughter, the nation would never have got off the ground. Hoping to recapture that vitality, a significant and extraordinarily beautiful animation came to Japanese cinemas last year.

Anime Hit

She lies on the back seat of the car, staring vacantly into space. Her hands clutch a bouquet of sweet peas. The image is of a girl half-alive, or half-dead, the dark background of the seat creating the impression of a coffin. "That's the elementary school," says her father, "Looks nice." The girl turns away and replies sullenly, "The one I went to before was better." She then grudgingly raises herself on all fours and sticks out her tongue at the school as the family speeds by on its way to their new home.

This is the opening scene of *Spirited Away*, the newest *anime* (animated cartoon) from the studio of Miyazaki



Photo : "Spirited Away" © 2001 Nibariki •TGNDTDM

Vacant-eyed and timorous, Chihiro represents young Japanese who are unaware of their inner strength

Hayao. Famous for his beloved *My Neighbor TOTORO* and anime featuring girls as heroines who save the world such as *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind* and the recent *Princess Mononoke*, Miyazaki once again takes up a disturbing issue. In *Nausicaa* it was global nuclear destruction, and in *Mononoke*, as well as others such as *Pom Poko* (directed by Takahata Isao), it was environmental destruction. This time in *Spirited Away* (the Japanese title is *Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi*) his heroine is a typical 10-year-old, bored, pampered and wary of anything beyond the comfort and security of her own little world. Her parents are equally typical of today's Japan: good-natured but somewhat empty-headed, their primary interest being in enjoying themselves.

Miyazaki takes this girl who, in his words, "has only the slightest concept of being alive or of personal identity" and has her discover her own inner strengths. At the end of the story her eyes reflect the serene intensity of a person who has the confidence to deal

with any situation and is at peace with herself and the world.

The means to her enlightenment is a kind of *shugyo*, training through difficult and often excruciating experiences. Like Alice falling through the rabbit hole, she and her parents enter a tunnel that takes them to a fantasy world where each experience is layered with allegory and spiked with jabs at today's world.

Gorging themselves on forbidden food, the parents are turned into pigs. The horrified Chihiro quickly finds out that to stay alive, she must work. To be given work, she must speak up. Here Miyazaki throws a dart not only at the reluctance of young people to turn a hand but also at their inability to speak for themselves. "Words are power," says Miyazaki. "If she would say, 'I don't want to' or 'I want to go back,' she instantly would become a wandering spirit or maybe a chicken to lay eggs until she would finally be eaten. On the other hand, if she would say, 'I want to work,' even Yubaba, the witch

Photo : © NHK2001/2002



Konoha stumbles and drops the sesame pudding in front of the temple guests, another faux pas that will incur the biting criticism of the stern nun

esty and greed. Trying to buy recognition and power with the gold, Kaonashi throws handfuls of nuggets into the crowd of bath house help. While all the others fall over themselves to retrieve the gold, Chihiro refuses and thereby saves herself from being devoured. Miyazaki undoubtedly based this scene on the film *The Life of Oharu* where Oharu, working as a courtesan in a house of amusement, refuses to

Shugyo

By chance, Chihiro's shugyo bears similarity to Nippon Hoso Kyokai (NHK: Japan Broadcasting Corporation) present serial drama *Honmamon* which is broadcast twice a day at 8:15 and 12:45 on General TV (7:30 on satellite).

Like its predecessors, *Honmamon* seeks to instill in today's audience values treasured by the Japanese like grit, forbearance, caring and dedication to family and work. The heroine, Yamanaka Konoha, wants to become a professional chef of traditional Japanese cuisine despite her father's objections ("Women don't make good chefs!") To this end she gets accepted as a live-in student of a nun who presides over a small Zen temple renown for her superb vegetarian cooking.

Konoha's experiences are a true shugyo, the word originally signifying the six types of spiritual training that lead to enlightenment. They are 1) *Fuse*: giving of oneself; 2) *Jikai*: refraining from wrong; 3) *Nin'niku*: perseverance; 4) *Shojin*: cleansing the heart, self-control, modesty; 5) *Zenjo*: serenity; 6) *Chie*: wisdom, i.e. knowing what is of true value. Vegetarian temple food is appropriately called *shojin ryori*. Konoha learns through the strict instruction of the nun; Chihiro through withstanding the virulent temperament of the witch. In both cases the girls must overcome physical discomfort and mental stress. And in both cases they emerge from their ordeal better, happier human beings.

Although these values are no longer explicitly taught at home or in school, they are such an integral part of Japanese thought that they surely will endure. NHK and Miyazaki will do their best to see that they do at any rate. Behind those vacant eyes one sees in Japanese youth lies the promise of a spirit ready to be awakened. Linda, you needn't be so pessimistic. **UJI**

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who controls that world, has to comply. Nowadays words have absolutely no content, anything frothy is accepted – and that reflects our society."

From the moment she starts looking for work, the lessons begin. When she hesitates, she is sharply told, "If you start doing something, finish it!" When she forgets to say thank you, she is quickly reminded. It soon becomes apparent that she must take responsibility for all of her actions. It is not that she doesn't know what she should do, but it's that until now she has never been expected to show any capabilities whether they involved simply being polite or something of great content, such as courage and determination.

The world she finds herself in is dominated by a fantastic Japanese roco bath house where Yubaba lives in opulence on the top floor. Each evening strange and delightful spirit creatures come by ferry from across a broad river to bathe and refresh themselves. The first great test Chihiro endures arrives in the form of a river god covered in stinking mud. It is her job to welcome it, accept the filthy gruity and clean off the sludge.

After Chihiro succeeds in removing the dirt and garbage that had afflicted the river god, an uninvited guest Kaonashi (Faceless Spirit), discovers nuggets of gold remaining on the bath floor. These next form a test of hon-

gather the coins scattered by a debauched guest. In that film, however, the heroine eventually is persuaded to pick up some coins. Her reward is humiliation. On the other hand, Chihiro's integrity and pluck serve to reform Kaonashi and win its admiration and devotion.

Chihiro's final exploit requires selfless love as well as the courage to face the unknown. It also involves the need to "know thyself." Before Chihiro was allowed to work, the witch had changed her name. "Chihiro! What an extravagant name! Sen is enough," she commanded, using another reading of the first character of Chihiro's name. It was more than a lesson in modesty; it took away her identity. In the same way, the boy who saves Chihiro by exhorting her never to forget her real name is doomed to stay forever in Yubaba's world because he forgot his. By helping him to remember his real name, Chihiro saves both of them.

Overcoming her fears, realizing her strengths, gaining a belief in herself, respecting the needs of others, and giving of herself – Chihiro develops into a full person, alive and eager to live. Her shugyo parallels what is needed today, and so the unexpected box office success of *Spirited Away* (it topped even *Titanic*) may be foretelling a fundamental change in the youth of Japan.