

Indulgence in?

By Hatakeyama Noboru

Last spring a seminar aimed at spreading the Japanese language to non-Japanese speakers was held by the Japan Foundation. The event featured a dialogue in Japanese between H.E. Mr. Graham Fry, the UK ambassador to Japan, and H.E. Mr. Domingo Siazon, the ambassador from the Philippines. Since I know both of them and I am interested in spreading the Japanese language to the rest of the world, I attended the seminar, which, if I am allowed to exaggerate a bit, has changed my private life.

On the podium, the two ambassadors were talking with each other in eloquent Japanese. In the middle of their conversation, Ambassador Fry referred to a Japanese word, which I did not know. After I went back home, I hesitantly asked my wife about the meaning of the word. She said: "Don't you know *Sudoku*? It has come into vogue all over Japan now." She appeared surprised at my ignorance about a fashionable trend in my own country. Thus, my wife taught me how to play *Sudoku*. Since then I have indulged in this mind-bending game.

Sudoku somewhat resembles a crossword puzzle. There are 9 x 9 square spaces, and some of them (the number depending on the degree of difficulty in the game) are filled beforehand with single-digit numbers, and the rest are left blank. You have to fill the blank spaces with single-digit numbers so that every vertical and every horizontal line consist of nine distinct numbers – one to nine.

Sudoku is a very good medicine to kill time, but you have to be careful about an overdose. Last July, I went to Weihai in China and I had to wait for five hours at Beijing Capital International Airport to get a transfer flight. However, the five hours passed really fast, as I was playing *Sudoku*.

Now every major newspaper in Japan carries *Sudoku* puzzles in its weekend editions. If you do not want to buy *Sudoku* books, you can also download the game off the Internet and you can enjoy a virtually unlimited number of *Sudoku* free of charge.

It is not only in Japan that *Sudoku* has proliferated. Last summer an Indian company held a seminar in Karuizawa, a prestigious resort in central Japan. During lunch time, I went to a table seated by around 10 Indians and asked them if they knew *Sudoku*. Each one of them replied yes and asked me: "Are there any Japanese who do not know *Sudoku*?"

Last autumn, during a flight from Japan to the United States, an American gentleman sitting next to me seemed to be reading USA Today. Actually he was solving a *Sudoku* puzzle printed in the newspaper. He kindly shared the puzzle solution with me and told me that the airline magazine carried a *Sudoku* puzzle.

Right from the start, this game spread quickly outside Japan. The original model was apparently invented in Switzerland in the 18th century. Similar puzzles were carried by newspapers in France close to the end of 19th century. The current model of *Sudoku* was completed by an American architect in the 1970s. It was in the 1980s that a Japanese came up with the name for this puzzle and called it *Sudoku*. "Su" means "number" and "doku" is "single" in Japanese.

Intensive marketing was conducted in the 1990s by a New Zealander who happened to have found a *Sudoku* book in Tokyo. He is said to have succeeded in persuading the London Times to print *Sudoku* puzzles. This is probably where the UK ambassador to Japan found out *Sudoku*.

Having said all this, I have been wondering why people who have a lot of experience in work and in private lives are so attracted to *Sudoku*. A friend of mine who had retired from government said: "When we were working for the government of Japan, there were many important issues. When we successfully resolved the issues, we got lots of satisfaction, and we were filled with a sense of achievement. After retiring from government, we have not had such a sense of achievement. *Sudoku*, once solved, might give you a similar sense of achievement."

For the last 10 years I had been writing a diary every day. I have stopped writing a diary now. For the last 10 years I have been doing oil painting. Now, I paint just enough to fulfill my obligations for the art exhibitions organized by the clubs where I belong. My sleeping hours have been cut by one and a half hours on average. All these happened just because of my indulgence in *Sudoku*. However, I am confident that I will never feel bored as long as I can play *Sudoku*. JS

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