

Blowing a Muted Horn

By Ayako Sono

The complex segmentation and multifaceted refractions of the human character make it difficult to describe the Japanese personality and psychology with any assurance. We do, however, share a sense of humility which must at times seem very odd to non-Japanese.

I have often been perplexed by some of the questions I get overseas or even from foreigners in Japan. For example, foreign reporters think nothing of asking me point-blank, "Do you consider yourself a successful novelist?" Better reporters may shy away from such bluntness, but the question has been asked.

This is a difficult question to answer. I do not know if the mere fact that I am able to make a living at writing makes me a successful writer or not. There are some authors earning huge royalties who do it with simplistic plots and sloppy writing, and there are other works that have only a limited appeal because their very quality as literature makes them difficult reading. It may well be that the best writers do not make much money at their craft, but that does not mean that they are not successful writers.

In terms of sales alone, as best I remember, my most popular essay sold around two and a half million copies and my most popular novel seven or eight hundred thousand. There is a saying among Japanese authors, however, that the truly great works are to be found among the long-sellers, not the best-sellers. So whenever one of my books makes the best-seller lists, I begin to suspect I have done something wrong or somehow betrayed my calling. Do foreign writers have this same feeling?

Another frequent question is, "How many of your works have been adapted for television and the movies?" For the Japanese writer, however, having a work adapted for the big or little screen is not something we take any particular pride in, and it is not something we would count among our accomplishments. In any case, we do not see a connection between such adaptations, which are, after all, simple business deals, and the quality



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of our work. Of course, we are paid for the rights to our works and are grateful for the extra income, but this is not a standard of excellence. In fact, all this says about a work is that it has popular appeal, and there is a certain disdain implied in the term "popular writer." Probably a score or so of my books have been made into films, but this figure means as little to me as the fact that I have written maybe more than a hundred books.

Well aware of the need to be prolific, to be confident, and to have a certain public-relations chutzpah, we nonetheless find such things personally distasteful. I have long since learned, however, that, just as electrical appliances must be designed differently for different markets, different responses are called for for different audiences. And so to the foreign reporter's question, "Do you consider yourself a successful novelist?", I unhesitatingly answer, "Yes, very much so," even though I know this is an unusual assertion for a Japanese to make.

The "proper" Japanese author, no matter how important a figure, would more likely demur, "Oh no, I still have a long way to go." Since I am able to make a living by writing, I do not consider myself a failure as a writer. Yet I find it difficult and embarrassing to conclude that, simply because I am not an abject failure, I must therefore be a "successful" novel-

ist. Indeed, the typical Japanese response would be astonishment at even being called upon for such a self-assessment.

The tea ceremony continues to be considered a very cultured pastime, and those who can afford it will often build their own personal tea rooms. These tea rooms are a far cry from the resplendently ostentatious monuments to financial success that might be expected by Westerners. The famous Kinkaku-ji temple (Golden Pavilion) in Kyoto is a good example. For all its elegance, it is nothing more than a collection of wood, paper, bamboo, and mud. Even the tea bowls and lacquer tea caddies so prized in the tea ceremony hide their true worth behind an outward facade of rude simplicity. Each, however, is a masterpiece of handcrafted perfection. The beauty we perceive is to be found in the understatement of such works and in the great art they conceal.

We have found understatement and humility extremely effective devices for drawing out others' thoughts and feelings without obstructing communication with direct confrontation. Carried to extremes, such reticence easily deteriorates into pandying, yet I contend that, properly used, it is a highly sophisticated means of assessing another's response before it is given and adjusting one's stance to promote rather than deter effective communication. There are multiple psychological motivations for the Japanese posture of humility: fear of disagreement and misunderstanding, the realization that unnecessary frankness can be discomforting, and the wish to indicate that we are fully aware of our own shortcomings and ignorance.

Obviously, we can be criticized for this propensity to adapt to others' expectations, but given the vast numbers of people who are so busy asserting themselves that they have little or no regard for others, I wonder if this Japanese understatement does not have something to recommend it after all. ●

(This is the last of five parts.)

Ayako Sono is one of Japan's leading women novelists. An ardent Catholic, she is deeply interested in religious and social problems and speaks and writes on these in addition to writing novels.