

Farewell to *Haragei*

By Kunio Yanagida

For centuries the Japanese have prided themselves on their skill in *haragei*, the subtle art of nonverbal communication. So homogeneous are the Japanese people that, the myth says, they can communicate their innermost feelings with minimal verbal expression. Times have changed, however, and *haragei* is fast on its way to becoming obsolete. In any case, there are wide divergences among the different regions of the country despite Japan's small size, and *haragei* has not always been an effective means of communication between people of different regions.

By way of illustration, let me recount a recent episode involving two neighbors of mine, S., a Tokyo businessman, and K., a former Osaka resident. These two are good friends, and their children are classmates at the local school. Yet one day they met unexpectedly in an office complex where S. had gone on business. S. immediately recognized K. and greeted him with a smile. K., however, hesitated a moment and then responded with a friendly, "Making any money?" He had not recognized S. but had mistaken him for a business associate.

"Making any money?" is a common greeting among Osaka area businessmen, and it was a perfectly natural thing for K. to say to a business associate. Tokyoite neighbor S., however, was taken aback by what he perceived as a totally inappropriate response. Realizing his mistake, K. immediately backedpedaled. "I'm sorry, S., I didn't recognize you at first."

Recounted by the two men after they returned home, this episode quickly became a subject of considerable mirth within our neighborhood. The cultural differences between Tokyo and Osaka are deeply rooted, going back to the days of the samurai in the 17th through the 19th centuries. Far from the seat of government in Edo (now Tokyo), Osaka and the cities around it quickly grew into flourishing commercial centers. The city of Sakai, in particular, functioned with an

independence resembling that of European city-states such as Venice in the Middle Ages. Unburdened by governmental authority, the Osaka merchants were free to pursue their dearest passion: profit. Asking each other if they were making money was not a sly attempt to seek out new avenues of profit but simply a greeting no more significant than asking, "How are things going?" or "How's business?"

In Edo, however, an upperclass consciousness fostered by a large and conservative samurai government prevailed, and merchants were ranked extremely low on the social scale. Pursuing profits was considered somehow dirty by the samurai rulers, and merchants refrained from overt reference to their real doings and motivations. Rather than amassing wealth, the Edo merchant and craftsman took pride in how quickly he could spend the money he had earned. In Edo, the disdain for money was more important than any love of making money.

This difference between Osaka and Tokyo merchants persists even today. The Osaka area businessman is engrossed in turning a profit for his company. His motivation is pure and simple. The assumption is that if his own business prospers, society will also prosper—a fairly straightforward Adam Smith capitalism.

By contrast, Tokyo businessmen, particularly those managing the really big corporations, talk about social and national responsibility. Rather than admit to any base pursuit of profit, they seem to imply that if the national and international economies are sound, business will take care of itself.

S.'s reaction to K.'s greeting, "Making any money?" was thus caused by a cultural gap in many ways just as wide as that between a Japanese and a Western businessman. Yet such is not to imply that Tokyoites always talk in lofty-sounding generalities and Osaka people are always straightforwardly candid about what they think. Here the difference is historical. Kansai (in part Osaka but more

especially the Kyoto area) was traditionally the milieu of a refined nobility, Kanto the stronghold of an austere samurai class.

Kansai reticent, Kanto straightforward

The earliest Japanese urban culture developed in the Kansai region, and it was dominated by a sophisticated nobility which considered *miyabi*, refinement and elegance, to be the epitome of good breeding. Direct confrontation in any form was to be avoided, leading to a roundabout manner of expression in even the simplest communications. To this day, Kansai children are still admonished by their parents to try to surmise people's true feelings from what they say.

In the ancient capital of Kyoto, it has long been customary to urge visitors to stay for a snack. Yet to accept this invitation would be considered impolite in the extreme. The invitation to stay for a bite to eat is simply a politeness and it is not meant to be taken literally. To accept the invitation would be to reveal oneself as uncultured and rude.

The custom is quite the opposite in the Kanto region. Any last-minute invitation to stay to dinner is sincere and should be accepted. To refuse this hospitality would be considered an affront to the host and a slap in the face after all the trouble he has taken.

In this, the Kanto person, especially outside of the cities, usually says pretty much what he means—to the extent that the Kansai person complains that Kanto people are too outspoken, vulgar and lack finesse. In reply, the Kanto person complains that Kansai people are evasive. "Everything they say," runs the Kanto complaint, "is so roundabout and indirect that it's almost impossible to understand them."

While its advocates claim that Kansai indirectness is a manifestation of kindness, grace and consideration, its detractors accuse it of leading to mis-

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understanding, mistaken assumptions, suspicion and uncertainty. As this difference in custom and manners between the Kanto and Kansai regions illustrates, communication is no simple task when cultural mores differ. And yet we have no choice but to depend on words, especially for communication between people of different cultures.

Human beings rely heavily on verbal communication; the more distant a relationship the more necessary the words. The explicitness required for communication increases in direct proportion to the distance between people. Little verbal communication is needed with family members, more with friends, still more with neighbors and people from the same

region (prefecture, state, etc.), even more with people who share only the same citizenship and most of all among people from different national backgrounds. Nonverbal communication is possible among members of a family because they have lived together for so long, but it is clearly inadequate among people raised in completely different cultures.

A more verbal society

Yet because of the traditional Japanese esteem for *haragei*, little effort has been made to develop eloquent verbal communication skills. It was assumed that we all speak the same language and therefore have no need to speak it. Major changes in the social fabric, however, have prompted a new awareness of the importance of effective verbal communication. There are three underlying causes for this. First of all, advanced transportation systems and urbanization have contributed to increased population mobility and people from various regions are more frequently finding themselves in the same community.

Secondly, people are developing widely diverging values and lifestyles, and it can no longer be assumed that everyone will understand everyone else. Younger people especially are showing a decided preference for direct expression rather than *haragei*-like circumlocution.

Thirdly, more and more Japanese are traveling abroad. Recent statistics show an annual outpouring of four million Japanese, all of whom have been exposed to different cultures and different assumptions.

Given the rapid changes in Japanese society, Japanese can no longer be assured that nonverbal communication will suffice for expressing their true feelings. Like it or not, words are needed, both for explaining ourselves and for finding out what the other person is thinking. *Haragei* is rapidly becoming a thing of the past, and the new Japanese are more assertive and more communicative. ●

(This is the third of six parts.)