

Objects of Affection

By Shuji Takashina

One of Japan's many interesting traditions is that of holding requiem services for old sewing needles, a ritual dating back to the Edo period (1616–1868). Such services are held throughout Japan on a special day (February 8 in some areas and December 8 in others), when broken or rusted needles are stuck into pieces of *tofu* as part of a ceremony of appreciation and prayers for greater sewing skills.

Sewing has long been a woman's craft in Japan, and even though virtually all of today's clothes, bedding and other fabric products are factory-made, there is not a housewife who doesn't own and use a sewing kit. Modern textile manufacturing techniques mass-produce even intricate kimonos, yet the work of mending seams and tears remains the domain of housewives and their trusty needles. And so the needle requiem service lives on, giving people a chance to thank their needles for their long and faithful assistance and to lay them to rest in some nice, tranquil spot.

As sentimental as this tradition may sound, it has some very practical reasoning behind it. To begin with, what is to be done with old needles? You don't want them cluttering up your sewing box. Nor should you simply leave them lying about where they could easily end up sticking into someone. Even putting them out in the garbage runs the risk that someone will accidentally get hurt—especially in the old days when garbage was manually managed. So why not set a special day aside each year for the safe, centralized disposal of old needles?

But even if this requiem for old needles lost all of its practicality, I suspect it would still be carried on because that's the way the Japanese are. The Japanese psyche includes a great capacity for love and affection toward simple inanimate tools such as sewing needles and for attributing personalities to such tools. These feelings are then expressed by arranging for the old needles to rest in peace.

After all, they worked hard, being pushed through heavy fabrics and squeezed between tightly woven threads. Why shouldn't they be lovingly laid to rest in the cushioned comfort of a piece of *tofu*? Is it really that odd to think of them

not as lifeless pieces of metal but as old companions?

Such thinking is not limited to needles, of course. Another still-thriving practice is that of building a writing-brush mound. Writing utensils are another vital part of everyday life, and so Japanese feel the same sort of compassion for their brushes as they do for their needles. Rather than simply abandoning an old friend in some anonymous garbage heap, a special service of thanks is held.

The West does not seem to identify with its tools to the same degree. Rather, Westerners tend to make a sharp distinction between men and beasts, and an even sharper distinction between animate (sentient) beings and inanimate (non-sentient) things. Western families may consider their pet dogs, cats or birds full-fledged members of the family, but where is the tradition of holding requiem services for pens and pencils?

There are many more examples of traditional affection for tools to be found in Japanese art history. The *hyakkiyako* (pandemonium scenes) drawn by Edo period artists depict large gatherings of various monsters, and amidst these creatures can be seen umbrellas, kettles and other household utensils come alive as supernatural beings. In addition, there are also portrayals of traditional musical instruments such as the *koto* and *biwa* that have sprouted limbs and tails.

We have all seen Western paintings of spooks and fairies, but have everyday tools ever graced a Western canvas in their afterlife forms? The only work to even come close can be seen in Madrid's Prado Museum—the famous triptych *Garden of Earthly Delights* by the Dutch painter Hieronymus Bosch (c.1450–c.1516). In Bosch's unique depiction of Hell, one sinner is shown affixed to a drum while another is intertwined among the strings of a harp. These instruments in Hell are not animate, however. They remain simply tools—in this case, instruments of punishment.

Attributing a soul to tools and other inanimate objects is characteristic of the animistic thinking found in many primitive tribal cultures. As civilizations have

evolved, however, the rationalism that has come to the fore has gradually negated such animism. Indeed, much of "modern thinking" is seen as the turn away from animism and to a rational, mechanistic worldview.

Does the Japanese penchant for such animistic practices as the requiem service for needles then brand Japan as a primitive society? And if so, how is it that such a primitive society attracts such criticism for the efficiency of its industrial production and international trade practices? Animistic Japan is competing quite well in today's fast-paced technological world.

In fact, I would even venture to say that Japan is doing as well as it is precisely because of these animistic tendencies. For example, the reason that there has been so little resistance to mechanization and automation is because Japanese workers are able to see their tools as individuals. This traditional mentality is thus a positive asset in installing large robot work forces in Japanese factories.

When assembly-line production was in its heyday, rigid production schedules meant that factory workers were forced to perform simple, repetitive tasks that made them, in effect, no more than gears in the production machinery. This problem was superbly presented in the 1936 Chaplin film classic *Modern Times*, a satirical indictment of the mechanization of human beings.

Today, as robots replace humans on the production line, Western workers have stopped worrying about themselves becoming machine-like and are instead worrying about machines becoming more human and stealing people's jobs. Such feelings of anxiety and robot-rejection, however, are relatively scarce in Japan.

What we see instead in Japan is workers personifying their robots by naming them after popular entertainers, decorating them with garlands, and making friends with them. The traditional "animistic" mentality lives on, and in a very real sense you could say that Japan's social consensus in favor of robotization was formed long ago in the Edo period. ● (This is the second of six parts.)

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