

# Behind Every Great Man

By Ayako Sono

In one of the many unforgettable passages he has written, Professor Kiyoshi Ikeda of Keio University speculates on how two men would react to a wifely lament about how grey her hair is getting. Hearing his wife's sigh, the foreign husband would probably console his wife with, "You still look young and beautiful to me." But the typical Japanese husband's response would be, "Of course your hair's turning grey. You're no youngster anymore."

Having studied at Cambridge and Heidelberg, and having been raised in the United Kingdom from high school on, Ikeda is quite at home with Western thinking. Linguistically, he is fluent in both English and German as well as his native Japanese. So I believe him when he explains that these two responses, seemingly so different, are really one and the same.

Japanese are exceedingly fond of the nuances words have. They prefer not to say things straight-out, and the art of seeking out hidden meanings is highly developed here. Thus the husband's "You're no youngster anymore" does not mean the cruelly biting, "Of course your hair's turning grey. You're getting old. Just look at you," but rather has warm undertones of appreciation for the wife who has grown old with him. Implied is the promise, "We both know we're not kids anymore, but don't worry. I'll take care of you even when we're old and grey."

This is understood by the Japanese wife, and she asks for no more. Nor would most Japanese men be comfortable with more explicit language. In fact, there are many men who say it would be terrible to be married to a foreign woman—to have to tell her he loves her every day and to have to comment on how great she looks every time she buys a new dress or gets her hair done. (Of course, having never been married to a foreign man myself, I cannot vouch for the accuracy of the assumption that this is the way foreign husbands act, but that is the stereotype.) Most Japanese men do not comment at all on what their wives are wearing. In fact, they would probably not even be able

to identify her wardrobe. Instead, the Japanese husband has an awareness of his wife as an ever-present aura; and since she is an irreplaceable part of his life he cares not if she is young or old, beautiful or ugly. She is his wife, and that is enough. Of course, there are some who say that such a relationship lacks the tension which should be present in any relationship between the sexes, but I do not think so.

Having gone to a missionary school, I have had numerous opportunities to socialize with foreigners, but this experience has only made me all the more skeptical of cross-cultural marriages. Given the profound psychological differences which underlie the expressional differences between Japanese and other languages, I seriously doubt if husband and wife would ever really be able to communicate smoothly in a cross-cultural marriage.

## Home at the office

I recently had the opportunity to talk with a group of up-and-coming government officials. Describing the typical workday, they said they arrive at the office a little before 10 a.m. and don't arrive home until about 8 p.m. at the earliest, and that it is often close to midnight. If they have to go to the office on Sunday, they do it knowing they will not get a make-up day off. When I expressed amazement that they were working so hard, one of them remarked, to general agreement, "Well, it's not as if we're in a job we don't like." And indeed, they do not look at all like browbeaten clerical workers forced to slave away to eke out a living. Instead, they are professionals doing a job they enjoy, and it is men like these who brought modern Japan back from the ashes of war.

When I observed that I had heard there are places where a man would be divorced for leaving his wife at home and going to the office on Sundays, their replies were, "The wife knows I'm at the office working, so she doesn't complain," "She'd grumble if we stayed out all night playing mahjong,

but..." and "She's really very understanding about it." The wife is very understanding because she knows that it is important to her husband.

## Pride in their work

Just before the above discussion, we had been talking about how the Japanese work so hard, and the reasons why their work seems to be their life for so many of them. And this is not restricted to the up-and-coming executives. It extends to blue-collar workers and virtually everybody in the labor force. When they head for work in the morning, it is not because they have to but because they take pleasure and pride in their work. In little shops all across the land, there are people who experience joy from improving the production process, reducing the defect rate, and upping productivity.

So when people say the Japanese work too hard, I want to tell them to butt out. The audacity and futility of asking the horticulturist "What are you wasting your time messing around with flowers for?" or admonishing the Casanova to "quit fooling around with the girls" is clear. Isn't it the same thing trying to tell a Japanese not to work so hard?

Although the younger generations appear to their elders to be irresponsible and always seeking the path of least resistance, give them a position of responsibility and they quickly grow into responsible workers taking pride in what they do.

Hearing how sympathetic their wives were, and being a woman myself, I asked these young government officials, "In effect, then, isn't it your wives that have motivated you and made it possible for you to work so hard?" After a moment's reflection, one of them said tongue-in-cheek, "Actually, we still deserve the credit for it—because we trained our wives to be that way." There is just no stopping them. ●

(This is the second of five parts.)

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