

Letter to the Editor

By Ayako Sono

The letters-to-the-editor column is always the most interesting part of a newspaper, and the most interesting letters are those not from scholarly experts but from over-wrought women who are only interested in making sure they are heard, the broader ramifications be damned. In fact, it is their very lack of objective logic which makes their furious outbursts such delicious reading. It's such fun that I've sometimes wanted to join in the fray and write a letter to the editor myself. In fact I've recently had a strong compulsion to write to American and European newspapers. Only my lack of English proficiency and my reluctance to impose on a translator have kept me from taking pen in hand. But the compulsion grows stronger, and....

Dear Editor,

I hear that your government is demanding that we Japanese buy more of your products, but I would like to put in my two cents' worth (if not my \$100 dollars' worth) in this debate.

I am tall for a Japanese woman and I like long flowing nightgowns to sleep in. So even though I wear a Japanese watch and drive a Japanese car, I've been buying American-made nightgowns because they fit me better. Recently, I went to the Japanese representatives of one of America's leading department stores and ordered a new nightgown from the catalog. I spent a long time picking out one I liked, and the clerk told me that it would be delivered in about a month by air. (Usually I have things sent by seemail, but I decided to splurge and have it sent by air because I wanted it for a trip I was planning).

About a month later, however, I got not the nightgown but a notice that the one I wanted was "out of stock." Can you believe it? Does it really take a whole month to find out that you don't have something in stock? It is hard to believe in this computerized age, but I can only surmise that, after they got my order, someone walked through miles and miles of warehouses searching for my nightgown. How

else could it have taken so long? Talk about out-moded distribution systems!

I've had other bad experiences with foreign products. On a recent trip to Europe, for example, I bought my husband a pocket flask for his birthday. It wasn't cheap, either. I don't go for big-name designer brands like so many other Japanese, but a friend told me later that the store where I bought it is quite well known—I just seem to have naturally good taste.

Anyway, my husband was very happy with the flask and he decided to take it with him on his next business trip. Well, wouldn't you know it? No sooner had he started filling it than it started leaking all over the place. Some present! What is this with a leaky flask? Such shoddy workmanship would never have gotten out of the factory in Japan. What do people think they're doing making junk like that? I can't go all the way back to Europe to have the flask replaced, you know.

Jitsugyo no Nihon is an authoritative economic journal which I happen to read sometimes, and it recently reported that the Ministry of International Trade and Industry has purchased two imported cars to set an example for us and to show foreigners that Japan really is open to imports. These foreign cars cost two and a half to three times as much as Japanese cars. Upkeep on them is estimated at ¥440,000 (about \$1,760) a year versus the ¥120,000 (\$480) a year average for Japanese cars. And on top of that, the foreign cars can't be used half the time because they're in the shop for repairs. As a taxpayer, I find it very annoying to say the least to hear that my money is being wasted this way.

A cab driver has told me that the Japanese taxi can be driven for 500,000 kilometers with no major problems. The ordinary family car can go for 200,000 kilometers with no shopwork at all. (Of course, tires do have to be replaced, but that's not the sort of thing I mean.) You can actually drive a family car longer, but it would take about 15 years to put 200,000 kilometers on the odometer any-

way, and my cabbie friend said the body would rust out before the engine gave out. I've never had a foreign car myself, but friends have warned me not to buy American makes because they keep having problems.

This same issue of *Jitsugyo no Nihon* also had an article about the 1985 Hanover trade fair. A Japanese businessman at the fair recently was dumbfounded at being asked by a German executive, "Do you have any non-IBM computers in Japan?" Now it may well be that the German was joking and that this story only illustrates how the Japanese have no sense of humor—except for my husband—but it's at least just as possible that he was serious and that this was an embarrassing display of abysmal ignorance.

Just 20 years or so ago foreign products were all the rage in Japan. Actually, they still are. My silly niece is always carrying handbags plastered with some famous foreign brand name or other—so much so that I sometimes wonder if she's not being paid to be a sandwich man for them.

The market potential is there, and you have only yourselves to blame if you can't take advantage of it. I don't know why you feel you have to rant and rave so. If you make good products and do your marketing homework, they'll sell here as well as anywhere else.

Trying to browbeat us is only counter-productive. I don't know if you remember it or not, but the oil crisis hit resource-poor Japan especially hard. Everybody was predicting we would be reduced to 1946-style destitution and hardship again. But we have an inner strength that enables us to rally and to work together to make things better—without the government's telling us what to do. You back us into a corner and we fight our way out. While hardship may force a lot of Japanese companies to trim their operations to the bone, their wits are sharpened by their new leanness.

So don't push us too hard. The greater the pressure, the more likely we are to develop wonderful new technologies to make the impossible possible and keep us in front.

I'm still young, and I never did like the stories about how the brave *kamikaze* pilots fearlessly sacrificed all in an effort to buy time for Japan. I hope things never come to that again, but what's a body have to do to find a nightgown that fits? ●

(This is the third 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.