

# The New Breed (Part 1)

By Shozaburo Kimura

New words and expressions tend to become current very rapidly in Japan as people delight in capturing major social phenomena in a single word or phrase. One term that has taken hold since last year is *shin-jinrui*, the "new breed." The new breed refers to today's young Japanese, people whose philosophies and actions strike their elders as so incomprehensible and alien that they can only belong to a completely new race of human beings.

As a university professor I have perhaps had more opportunity than most people of my generation (I am 56) to observe this new breed at close hand. I have thus attempted to glean from my own experience some understanding of the puzzle posed by today's Japanese youth.

Summer is a hot, humid time of year in Japan, and this is particularly noticeable in those subways that do not have air conditioning. A subway car full of commuters with all its windows closed is especially bad. Yet it is only the middle-aged and older passengers who move to open windows on their own initiative. The younger passengers bemoan the heat and mop at their sweating brows with limp handkerchiefs, yet make no move to open a window. What stays their hands? Completely baffled, I asked my students to enlighten me.

"Why is it that you young people don't open the windows when the heat is so stifling in the subway? Aren't you hot?" I asked.

"Oh yes, we feel the heat."

"Then why on earth don't you open the windows?"

At first there was no answer, as if I had asked a question that either did not have or did not deserve an answer. Finally, one by one, they spoke up, giving me incredible, totally unexpected answers. Their basic response: Even if I am hot, I have no way of knowing whether the other people in the subway are also hot. Who am I to take it upon myself to turn around and open a window?

When I was young, every household

slept under mosquito netting in the summers. We would gather under the netting in the evenings, frantically fanning ourselves and telling each other how unbearably hot it was. By stating the obvious, we consoled each other and reaffirmed the shared experience.

How different it is for today's youth. Raised with their own air-conditioned rooms, they have had little opportunity to share experiences and feelings with others. They do not have the background of shared experience.

This is most obviously true of bathing. Since almost all homes have private baths now, young people grow up accustomed to bathing alone at home, and do not know what it is like to go to the *senjo* (communal public bath). Unable to accept the naturalness of bathing naked when others are present, they commit the mind-boggling gaffe of wearing bathing suits even when they are at hot spring resorts. This is something that would never occur to us older people, steeped as we are in the nudist decorum of public bathing, and I could hardly believe my eyes the first time I saw someone wearing one at a spa.

Unlike their elders, who have made a conscious effort all their lives to foster group identity, today's young Japanese purposely distance themselves from others. "I am me and you are you, and it would be wrong to think of us as us," they seem to say.

This sense of isolation is estranging the young worker from the company. The younger employees at many of Japan's large companies feel no empathy for the communal spirit that has traditionally united everyone in the corporate organization, from president to the lowliest worker, in single-minded, all-consuming devotion to the good of the corporation.

A friend of mine, a senior editor at a major publishing company, once complained to me of this trend. One evening after work, he invited some of his younger co-workers to join him for a few at a nearby drinking establishment. His in-

attention was to utilize the relaxed occasion to pass on a bit of the wisdom and experience he had acquired in his work, just as his seniors had done for him during his early days at the company. But he was quickly cut short. "We've finished working for the day so let's talk about something more interesting, not our work," he was admonished. "But if we don't talk about these things," he thought, "precious traditions will be lost for lack of anyone to learn them and carry them forward. The company is more than just a temporary collection of people." It was, he said, a sad experience.

Alienated from their surroundings, the new breed makes no attempt to initiate relationships with others. The university senior says he cannot understand the junior, the junior claims the sophomore is incomprehensible, and the sophomore feels he has nothing in common with the freshman. Yet in truth, it is not that these people cannot understand each other so much as that they do not care to understand each other. Instead, they start off with the assumption that they have nothing in common and that understanding is impossible.

A fellow teacher's plight illustrates this phenomenon. A specialist in Asian history, she frequently takes a large historical map to her lectures. Small of stature and slight of build, she always has difficulty getting the map up on the classroom wall. Yet her students simply watch her struggle, waiting in silence for her to begin her lecture. To the students, the teacher is like someone on television, visible but totally inaccessible, and thus they fail to react to her obvious need for help. Yet were she to ask for help, they would be happy to oblige—albeit startled at first to be called upon from across this chasm.

Today's young Japanese is actually a hard worker, much more malleable than his elders. Though he lacks any sense of group identity, he willingly submits to the system. There are no signs among today's young students of the youthful fire and rebellion that marked the student upris-

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ings of the late 1960s. Instead they obediently do as they are told, applying themselves with equal zeal to whatever task they may be assigned.

This shows up at the University of Tokyo's College of Arts and Sciences where I teach in a very high attendance rate. From 8:30 in the morning until 5:20 in the evening, the students faithfully attend all their classes. This is quite a contrast to my student days, when you would find few of us on campus in the mornings. Though we each studied in our own way, we did not feel any compulsion to attend lectures.

Unfortunately, today's students attend lectures not because they are driven by a love of scholarship but out of a desperate fear that they might miss something that will show up later on an examination. They come to lectures and listen attentively because that is their job. They are

doing exactly as they are told to do—no more, no less. Thus does the new breed willingly submit to socially dictated responsibilities within the public realm, never thinking to initiate changes in accepted practices.

This realization was brought home to me by my talks with my students regarding the hot subways of summer. As one student earnestly explained, "Even if I am uncomfortably hot and I can sense that my neighbor is also suffering, who am I to open a window? Many people today, men as well as women, take great pains with their hairstyles, and they might not appreciate having the wind mess up their carefully arranged coiffures." "There's nothing more embarrassing than a middle-aged man struggling with a window that refuses to open," added another student. "It's embarrassing even to watch, and I would never want

to put myself in that kind of a situation."

These young people are by no means insensitive to what happens around them, but they are confused about what to do and, as a result, end up doing nothing. Not knowing what the acceptable form for initiating change is, they endure whatever befalls them. In a hot subway, all you have to do is to politely ask your neighbor if he or she would mind if you opened a window. In all likelihood, your neighbor will not only consent but even help you. For the contemporary youth, however, taking such an initiative—speaking to a complete stranger—is even more of a hardship than the heat is. Speaking to strangers seems to have become taboo.

A few years ago I tested this hypothesis by turning to the young man standing next to me in the subway and commenting, "Nice day, isn't it?" The youth's eyes glazed over with apprehension; this was something that should never have happened. I could tell by his expression that he thought me crazy. The train was too crowded to allow him to escape, and the most he could do was to pretend he had not heard me, but I am sure he was thinking, "Why me? Why does this have to happen to me? I don't even know this geezer. No telling what he'll do next."

With fewer opportunities to share in the common experiences of humanity, today's young Japanese is inordinately conscious of his own isolation and insignificance in the larger societal context, and he finds himself unable to communicate freely with all but a small group of immediate associates—in many cases his immediate family.

The young Japanese is second to none in his devotion to his parents and, after he marries, his wife and children. Yet he feels apart and alienated from everyone else. No wonder young people today complain that they have many acquaintances but no close friends. They are hard working, obliging and lonely—a breed apart in modern Japan. ●

(This is the second of six essays to be written by Mr. Kimura.)