

# Understatement

By Fujii Hiroaki

One of my many pleasures in being the Japanese envoy to the United Kingdom was to seek out the real or apparent common traits between the peoples of the two countries.

One of these common traits is the habit of understatement. But while British understatement may come from the need for self-restraint or keeping a stiff upper lip in an adversarial or confrontational situation, Japanese understatement to a great extent comes from the need to show humility, which is regarded as an essential lubricant for civilized human relations.

In expressing this humility, the Japanese often use set language that, when translated literally into English, sounds almost amusing or even gives rise to misunderstanding. In one famous story, for example, a traditional Japanese host tries to usher his foreign guests to the lavish dinner table in the next room by saying, "Ladies and gentlemen, you kindly came all the way to my dinner, but there is nothing to eat tonight. So please eat the next room."

Another story has such a traditional Japanese person writing a thank-you letter to a friend who invited his family to dinner, saying, in a literal translation of his words, "I am terribly upset and ashamed that my stupid wife and foolish son caused you such great trouble."

In a more subtle case, when a Japanese gives a person a gift, he says, "This is only a worthless thing." But then the giver of the gift will be disappointed if the receiver really does think that it is worthless. In such a situation, the problem becomes one of culture rather than understatement.

Since ancient times, as exemplified by the statesman Prince Shotoku in the seventh century, the Japanese have considered the achievement of *wa* (harmony) among them as their principal goal. Even in Japanese society today, this harmony is the adhesive

force that to a considerable extent holds the framework together, so Japanese society is relatively crime-free, and compared with other developed nations, people are not tormented by a sense of isolation.

In order to maintain this society of harmony, the Japanese have developed at least two special characteristics. First, except for some really exceptional cases, they have not created conspicuously powerful leaders. Second, there is a wide gap between *tatemae* (stated feeling) and *honno* (real feeling). It is often said that the Japanese are poor when it comes to self-assertion. In traditional Japanese society, people who were too self-assertive were ostracized. And not because of the will of any leader, either. Strongly assertive leaders were ostracized, too.

For about 250 years during the Edo Period, ending in the middle of the nineteenth century, Japan had a virtual dispersion of power that was almost unheard of elsewhere in the world. For example, the three factors of power that the U.S. futurist and author Alvin Toffler talks about were separated in three different places. That is to say, political power lay with the shogun in Edo (present-day Tokyo), financial power was in Osaka, and authority and culture were in Kyoto, where the Emperor resided. This absence of a dictatorial leader in Japan helped to maintain the society of harmony and also established a custom by which important decisions were made not from the instructions of leaders but through a consensus among the constituent members.

The other main characteristic of traditional Japanese society is the difference between *tatemae* and *honno*. In all countries, of course, there is a difference in human behavior in formal situations and casual situations. In the case of Japan, however, this gap is extremely wide indeed. As with all

formal situations, *tatemae* is a preestablished harmony designed to conceal confrontations with others and unsightly things. Like all ceremonies, while not a lie, *tatemae* is a kind of fabrication.

In recent years, Japanese society has undergone a major change. The traditional host that I described above can hardly be found anymore. The gap between *tatemae* and *honno* is closing, too. In relation to the Japanese economy today, however, the harmful aspects of these characteristics have become pronounced. The consensus society obstructs fast and resolute decisions and makes change difficult. *Tatemae* hinders a close analysis of things and the transparency of information. It also complicates intercultural communication with other countries.

Today, Japan is going through the third period of change in its modern history, the first two having been the Meiji Restoration in 1868 and its defeat in World War II. In a sense, the present change is perhaps a playback to the Meiji Restoration. After the Meiji Restoration, Japan implemented "rich country, strong army" policies aimed at putting it on a par with other powerful nations. After the war, Japan went through a period of high economic growth. In both cases, the goal was growth and more growth to keep the curve on the graph moving upward.

In the current reforms in Japan, however, for the first time people have begun to express concern about the policy of quantitative growth. This concern has roots in the bald fact that Japan is growing older and in about 20 years' time its population is going to start shrinking. And not only that. As shown in the international conference on global warming held in Kyoto last year, people have begun to have second thoughts about the unsustainable expansion of humankind's economic activity, too. In an ever more crowded world, people are being asked to pool

their wisdom and live together, both environmentally and culturally. Japan is on the front line of science and technology, and its manufacturing industries aim to lead the world. But at the same time, beyond economic expansion, the way of living of people in the Edo Period (1603–1868), prior to the Meiji Restoration, when popular culture flourished, hides many messages for the 21st century.

Prime Minister Hashimoto Ryutaro is tackling structural reform in six areas, including fiscal administration, the economy, and education. The hurdles standing in the way of these reforms are high. Naturally, there is a struggle with vested interests. Moreover, although the Japanese have begun to feel a sense of uncertainty about the future, generally speaking they are satisfied with their current lives. The successful experience of rapid economic growth is still fresh in their memory. Historically, important reforms are easy to carry through in a situation of distress, but the memory of success blocks the way.

Another problem is that structural reforms must be carried out simultaneously with measures to rekindle the stagnant economy. Recently, people both at home and abroad have been heard to say that the economy is more important than reform. Of course, it is a matter of balance. And it is indeed very important for Japan to fulfill its economic responsibilities toward other countries. For Japan, however, the present is an important opportunity to resolutely carry out these reforms. Fortunately, the recovery of the Japanese economy and the structural reforms both point in the same direction. In other words, the economy will only be able to recover its virility through such measures as deregulation and the expansion of transparency.

The structural reforms that Japan is tackling now, however, extend far beyond economic territory and will take quite a long time to implement. That is to say, the reforms involve not only specific systems and practices but also, on a much deeper level, people's



behavior patterns and culture. The problem is what to change and what not to change. There is no objection to the proposal that corporate behavior patterns—corporate culture, if you like—should be changed and given more transparency. But to what extent should the characteristics of Japanese society relating to consensus and *tatemaie* be changed? There still has been no penetrating discussion of this problem in Japan.

In recent years, the mutual interdependence of the world has increased due to market forces, and common regulations, standards, and behavior patterns are emerging on a global scale. This is a major historical current, and a wonderful one, I think. At the same time, however, it is unclear whether this current, like all other historical currents, is going to bring happiness to the whole of humankind. It is a fact, at least, that market forces lack something that appeals to the human heart. The issue for humankind is how to connect the superiority of market forces to the happiness of all people, including the weak and the poor. Japan also is in the midst of the same trial. While undertaking its own reforms, Japan should contribute positively to the formation of common world standards.

In the 21st century, it should not be

only capital, technology, and markets that Japan offers the world. The question is whether Japan will be able to propose knowledge and ways of living that, in an increasingly crowded world, will be friendly to the globe, to nature, and to people, rich and poor. People who think of Japan as an economic country are ignorant of history. In the decades before 1945, unfortunately, Japan was a military country. But in the Edo Period before that, there was a period of popular culture, the culture of the common people. With the goals of universality and transparency, the question of what kind of reform Japan will implement from now on may have an important meaning for humankind in the 21st century.

The Japanese word for crisis, *kiki*, consists of two Chinese characters. One means danger. The other means opportunity. I believe that the various difficulties facing Japan now represent a precious opportunity for Japan. ■

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