

Windows on the World

By Kunio Yanagida

The protocol surrounding the illness of leaders offers an interesting insight into cultural norms. Whereas the Japanese tend to be very reticent, Americans delight in publishing all of the details.

When Prime Minister Hayato Ikeda attended the opening ceremonies for the 18th Olympiad in Tokyo in October 1964, he already was afflicted with terminal cancer of the larynx. But this was not publicized. Not only was the public kept in the dark about the prime minister's illness, the doctors did not even tell Ikeda himself. Two months later, when Ikeda gave up the premiership, it was announced that he was stepping down "because of the need for protracted hospitalization."

Likewise, when Prime Minister Masayoshi Ohira had a heart attack and collapsed while election-campaigning in 1980, he was hospitalized for an "irregular pulse." Even after he died less than two weeks later, there was very little discussion or analysis of his affliction.

More recent is the case of Kakuei Tanaka, former prime minister and powerful LDP leader. Tanaka has been secluded, first in a hospital and later at his Mejiro estate, since suffering a stroke last spring. Despite avid speculation in the press, little is known about Tanaka's actual condition, how effective the rehabilitation treatment has been, or even anything he might or might not have said to intimates.

This reticence is a far cry from the full disclosure in the United States. Whether it is a tumor on the presidential nose, an operation for cancer of the colon, or the exorcism of three tiny polyps, there are daily and almost hourly medical bulletins issued by the White House press office.

Such candor would be unthinkable in Japan. Here, the assumption is that news that a national leader or major political figure is seriously ill should be hushed up

to minimize the impact on the government and people. Accordingly, details are obscured in a cloud of vague and uninformative announcements.

The Japanese can be tight-lipped about a lot more than illness. As a writer, I have had numerous occasions to interview the political and business confidants of the rich and the powerful. I know these people could tell me many interesting stories about their bosses, about their failures as well as their successes, their frailties as well as their strengths. Yet in virtually every instance, my probing is blocked by meaningless platitudes and laudatory phrases calculated to keep me from getting even the smallest glimmers of these people's true character.

Even though it is ten years since Tanaka was arrested for his part in the Lockheed scandal, few of the people involved in the affair have stepped forward to give their versions of the affair. In the United States, practically everybody involved in the Watergate scandal has written widely about the debacle.

Emotion unspoken

What makes the Japanese so tight-lipped? Reliability and trust are so highly regarded as virtues that it is considered a betrayal to reveal the intimate details or breach the confidentiality of a relationship. Nurturing the fragile ties of harmony takes precedence over someone else's right to know. The Japanese proclivity to silence originates in a strong concern for maintaining order and harmony and is in no way an endorsement of secretiveness or an attempt to close off our society to others.

Tight-lipped and secretive are by no means the same thing. The Japanese can be just as eloquent as anyone in expressing their deepest feelings and emotions.

This was brought home to me most recently by Donald Keene, Columbia University professor and winner of last year's Japan Literary Prize for his *Hyakudai no Kakyaku—Nikki ni Miru Nihonjin* (Travelers in Eternity: The Japanese as Seen in Their Diaries).

This is not your conventional study of leading Japanese literary lights and their works but is an analytical anthology of diaries written between the ninth and 19th centuries. Keene's aim in focusing on these personal writings by people in all walks of life is to find clues to the Japanese character, a fascinating approach that has never before been attempted by either Japanese or foreign scholars.

With his sensitive expertise in both Western and Eastern literature—modern and ancient—Keene is perhaps the ideal person to have done this study. (It is indicative of Keene's scholarship that he wrote the book in Japanese.) Take, for example, his analysis of *Jojin-Ajari Haha no Shu*, an 11th-century diary written by an 84-year-old court lady about her son. Maternal love is a constant in all cultures and countries, says Keene, but the father-daughter relationship has tended to be a more popular theme in Western literature. Lear and Cordelia, Pericles and Marina, Prospero and Miranda, and even Wotan and Brunhild (in Wagner's *The Ring of the Nibelung*) come to mind. In Japan, however, the mother-son relationship is the favored theme, and Keene believes that *Jojin-Ajari Haha no Shu* may well be one of the oldest and best treatments of the subject.

Another diary under Keene's microscope is *Kaikoku Zakki*, a seven-year record kept by the prominent Buddhist monk Dokyo as he traveled throughout 15th-century Japan. Keene's primary interest in this work stems from Dokyo's attempts to trace the origins of colorful and unusual place names. The special Japa-



nese fondness for etymology, evident since the *Fudoki* provincial records of the early eighth century, has few counterparts in the West. What Englishman, for example, would ask to see the ford where the ox had crossed in Oxford? Only Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* shows the same kind of obsession for place names and their meanings. From this, Keene concludes that one of the

primary pleasures of traveling for a Japanese is the opportunity to see the places that have given birth to names and words of all kinds.

Truth not on display

In this and other ways, Keene makes convincing use of the diaries to illumi-

nate the differences and similarities between Japanese and Westerners. Above all else, he shows us that the Japanese people, intellectual and commoner alike, are prolific diarists.

Keene first learned of this Japanese love of diaries during the war, when he was charged with reading the diaries of Japanese war dead to ferret out any militarily useful information. Already deeply interested in Japanese literature, he discovered that these diaries were largely devoid of military secrets but rich in personal revelation.

Sensitive to any possible leaks, the U.S. military forbid its soldiers from keeping diaries. Since most American soldiers were not inclined to keep a diary anyway, this was not such a hardship for most GIs. On the other hand, the Japanese have been avid diarists for centuries, and the Japanese army not only allowed diaries, but even issued special notebooks for that very purpose. As a result, we now have a richly detailed historical record of the Japanese soldier's life on the front.

Keene found that most of the diaries he read were full of complaints that the common soldier dared not express openly and poignant concern for loved ones left behind. Truth is as important to the Japanese as to anyone else. We simply choose a different outlet for it; where the Westerner is demonstrative, the Japanese tends to be introverted. Whereas the Westerner is quick to explain his part in an event and tell his side of the story in a quest for public exoneration, the typical Japanese prefers to record this information in a personal diary for his own private vindication.

Keene's work opens a window onto the Japanese psyche that is a revelation for Japanese and non-Japanese reader alike. Opening more windows like this would do wonders to clear the air and to help peoples everywhere understand each other better. ●

(This is the second of six parts.)