

COUNTERPOINT

In Japan, show reverence where it's due (or not)

By ROGER PULVERS

Special to The Japan Times

Japan is the country that I feel most at home in. Yet, despite having arrived in 1967, and living here for the better part of the intervening 40 years, I still see myself as the odd man out in one particular aspect. I just can't "act Japanese" — if you will excuse the generalization — when it comes to this one thing.

It was brought home to me some time ago when I attended a public lecture given by a famous and highly respected cultural figure who I also happen to know personally.

Unfortunately, I found the lecture to be overlong and exceedingly lacking in meaningful content. But that is not the reason for my feeling different from the Japanese norm. Every speaker is allowed the occasional below-par performance, and I have been guilty of that more times than I wish to remember.

It was after the speech that it came out.

My friends, some of whom had been nodding off during the oration, were effusive in their praise of it. "Wasn't it exciting?" said one.

"Well," I muttered, "I wouldn't exactly call it *exciting*."

"Wow," exclaimed another, "he is just so amazing. His insight is astounding."

"Is it?" I mumbled, trying not to shrug my shoulders too high.

OK, there is no arguing taste, and maybe it was just me who found the speaker's cliched observations and calculated modesty a crushing bore. The point is not the speech but the

reaction of the others to it. And that was, in a word, reverential.

This quality, of automatic reverence expressed for someone in an exalted position, is a common Japanese trait. I am not talking here about respect for authority. That sort of thing exists everywhere in one degree or another. Most Japanese people, however, will go to great pains to repress any expression of disdain for someone who, by virtue of their position in society, commands respect.

Odd foreign students

Go to the doctor and get your prescription of medicines from him or her. When you do, it is only sensible to ask what each medicine is for and why you need them all. However, by doing so you may attract a jaundiced look from the doctor or dispensing nurse — a look that says, "So you know better what's good for you than a doctor?"

Go to a university classroom and watch the teacher ask for "any questions?" Invariably it is the odd foreign student from Vietnam, China or Korea who will raise their hand. Japanese students will appear meek and mild. If they do have a question, they are likely to go up after class and ask it privately, rather than risk embarrassing a teacher in front of others by asking something they may not be able to answer.

What's going on here? Patients who are "too curious" about the medicines that will go into their body, or students who put questions to teachers in public, may be seen as being aggressive — as trying to pose a challenge to the position occupied by the doctor or teacher. The patient or student may genuinely wish to have something explained or clarified, but it is not a virtue to display this desire. The rule is, keep your curiosity to yourself and swallow your pride with your medicine or received wisdom — or risk being viewed as a self-centered troublemaker.

The overriding principle governing this attitude in Japan is that of *jukyo*, or neo-Confucianism.

Despite monumental changes that have taken place in Japan over the 140 years since the fall of the Tokugawa Shogunate that led to the Meiji Restoration in 1868, the single most enduring aspect governing social behavior here has remained *jukyo*. This means that those who occupy positions of respect,

by virtue of age, station or accomplishment, must be paid that respect publicly and without face-to-face challenge. It is the position that merits the reverence, if not the individual.

The keenest Japanese virtue when it comes to jukyo consists in the suppressing of your irreverence in the name of social harmony. If your doctor prescribes a handful of different pills, just accept them and pay for them. No one will force you to swallow them when you get home. If a teacher says something questionable, shrug it off, repeat it on the exam paper as meticulously as you can, and after the term is finished forget the whole thing. If you do think that a highly respected cultural figure has given an awful lecture, smile and say how "stimulating" it was. You may find yourself a bit ill, not very well educated and unsure of how to express yourself frankly in the future, but you are sure to be successful and well liked in this society.

A muted note of cynicism

You are no doubt detecting more than a muted note of cynicism in my tone. Well, I can't deny it, any more than I can subdue my urge to look askance at those people (whatever reverence may be due to their station) who I simply feel do not "deserve" lavish praise. My ingrained notion of deservedness comes from a personal judgment of their words or actions at the time. This is where I become the odd *gaijin* (foreigner) out, despite my genuine desire to fit into Japanese society as comfortably as I can.

There have been, throughout Japanese history, a few iconoclasts who have bucked this "hierarchy of respect" and thrown reverence roughly out the window. The most stark examples may well be those of the postwar so-called Buraiha (rogue) school of writers, Sakunosuke Oda and Ango Sakaguchi.

Oda wrote of how tedious and non-cultural he found the exhibition of Shosoin treasures at Todaiji Temple in Nara, effectively ridiculing the masses of people who went there to get their dose of culture.

Sakaguchi, meanwhile, turned on the German architect Bruno Taut. While virtually all Japanese literati were charmed and tickled by Taut's exaltation of Japanese high culture and elegance, Sakaguchi railed against him for misunderstanding the true nature of the source of Japanese creativity — the

needs of the ordinary Japanese individual.

Oda and Sakaguchi were certainly rogues, but in their day — the all-too-brief postwar decade that fostered dissent — they were very popular.

Nowadays, if you nurture a natural and somewhat irrepressible inclination toward an honesty that may be seen here as brutal and unnecessarily challenging, you may become the odd person out. I know I would make a much "better" inhabitant of Japan if I could keep my qualms to myself.

I guess I'm a born knocker. I don't know about you, though, but I find it hard to swallow my medicine just because I'm told it's good for me.

The Japan Times: Sunday, June 10, 2007
(C) All rights reserved

[Go back to The Japan Times Online](#)

[Close window](#)