

COUNTERPOINT

Who are the oldies to fault young people's various social skills?

By ROGER PULVERS

Haragei is a word you don't hear very much anymore. Literally "belly art," *haragei* refers to the variety of persuasive communication that is done not with words but with the silent force of personality. Think of being stared down by a man sitting like a pot-bellied stove in front of you. But to be a *mukuchina hito* (a reticent or taciturn person) is still a virtue in Japan. The person of few words invariably trumps an articulate or glib opponent.

Despite the fact that *haragei* has gone the way of all flesh, Japanese modes of verbal communication have not changed significantly since World War II ended in 1945. Today's leaders are no more skillful at speaking their minds cogently and transparently than the leaders of the Meiji Era (1868-1912). Perhaps even less so. There is not much of what is called "meaningful dialogue" circulating in the air in this country. Japanese polemics are acrimonious: They are about personalities, not issues.

The young generation of Japanese men — and, to a lesser extent, women — has been characterized by society's elders as being withdrawn, passive, unmotivated and diffident. Now a report on their condition has been issued by a government agency.

Under the leadership of Tokyo Vice Gov. Naoki Inose, the Tokyo Metropolitan Government initiated a project to study and revitalize the use of language in all aspects of social and commercial intercourse. The presumption is that Japanese society — and primarily its young members — has been drawn away from serious reading, and that this has had a marked effect on the ability of Japanese people to function and succeed in the 21st century. On Nov. 26, the project issued its findings.

"The number of young Japanese who do not display an interest in anything but their own surroundings is increasing," says the report. "They show little concern for the overall trends in society in the areas of politics, economics and international affairs. . . . They prefer to immerse themselves in diluted ties with friends rather than endure the hardships necessary to open doors to new worlds. . . . They have fallen into a state of psychological national isolation."

The report goes on to state that, "it is vital (for young people) to be able to correctly understand another person who may have ideas that contradict their own and be able to convey their own thoughts accurately in words."

Here is some of the raw data collected for the project, sourced from a variety of respectable surveys and polls.

People were asked to respond to this: "I have read no books in the last month." (The category of "books" excluded magazines and manga.) A total of 46.1 percent of respondents replied they had read no books. This compares with 37.6 percent who gave the same answer in 2002. The percentage for people in their high teens topped the average, at 47.2.

The main reasons given for avoiding the printed page are these, in order: It causes me no inconvenience not to read; there's no book that I want to read (or, I don't know what to read); and, I don't have the time.

Well, what about newspapers? It is well known that the Japanese are a nation of newspaper readers — and a whopping 64.1 percent of them read the morning paper "virtually every day." This overall statistic hides the fact that the percentage of daily readers in the 18 to 30 age bracket hovers around 20 percent. The primary reason given by all respondents as to why they do not read the newspaper is that "it costs money," reflecting the Internet's influence in what appears to the user to be the provision of "free" information.

The TMG project also looked at the results of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) test given to students to test reading comprehension. The result was that, in comparison with their OECD counterparts, Japanese students had "low affinities" with books, and "this . . . mars the ability of young people to use language effectively."

The project report then turns to the key issue of education.

When school students were asked how often social issues were the subject of class discussions, 59 percent of Americans said "almost always." The percentages for other countries were equally high: Australia, 55; Canada, 54; Finland, 37. Japan was the lowest in the OECD, with a paltry 9 percent saying they held class discussions.

The result, concludes the report, is that young people today find it difficult to distinguish between opinion and fact; they have difficulty grasping the intent of people who are explaining themselves; they cannot clarify their own opinions on a solid basis; and, all they do in group discussions is say their peace without being able to find common ground for resolution and result.

Looking at the above paragraph, you would think it was actually about politicians in the Diet.

Young people, the report states, overemphasize the importance of communication with their peers in a profusion of text messages and social-network revelations. Being cool is more important, it claims, than being informed. More time is spent on such intimate communications than on studying, exercising, practicing music, etc. These young people apparently fear being left out, being seen as someone who does not know how to "read the atmosphere."

The report goes on to recommend a number of ways in which critical reading and critical thinking can be developed, including beefing up the curriculum to enhance the language arts of students and teachers.

However, I believe the crux of the problem lies firmly with the older generations. They created a society in which frank opinions cannot be expressed without fear of social retribution or censure. Young people in this society are still regarded as threatening the established order when they pose challenging and provocative questions.

In such a society, it is natural that young people are reluctant to exercise a quasi-freedom of expression that may only get them into hot water with closed-minded superiors and high-handed authorities. They clam up because it's not worth the gamble. And while, as the admirable TMG report points out, serious reading has declined, might this not indicate that the content of that reading, while instructive and useful to previous generations, may not always be of value in a century whose information is formatted, presented and revealed differently from the old days?

I agree with Tatsuo Kitagawa, a project member who helped draw up the report, and who wrote: "We must think up an education for an era of social pluralism in the country that is focused to its core; an education that stocks up on the knowledge required (for young Japanese) to express themselves, to understand exactly where others are coming from."

I just wish, with the century itself about to turn into its teens, that this education could somehow be made available to the older generations that created a society intolerant of free expression in the first place. Until this country creates a society in which individuals can express their opinions with clarity and impunity, there will be no openness — and young people

will certainly create a shell for themselves, to wait inside it until the coast is clear.

The Japan Times: Sunday, Dec. 26, 2010
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