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The Zephyr and Japanese Literature

Bonnie Newcomer

"This is the *Japanese* part of it," declared a puzzled TV news commentator recently as he tried to help an American audience understand Masako Owada's decision to give up her profession and her Western-taught female independence to become a Japanese princess. He joined other journalists in lamenting Owada's submission to duty and patriotism if she had to abandon the modern world for a life of "antiquated ceremonial roles" (Powell 30). Smiling, I wished I could share my newfound knowledge of *girl* and *ninjo* with the journalists. But I also wondered if a simple explanation of the terms would enable them to understand Owada's decision. After all, some concepts, especially those that are most deeply embedded in other cultures, cannot be instantly appreciated. Understanding those concepts emerges from thinking about people's lives and the impact their decisions have made on their destinies. Those fateful decisions are most often studied in humanities classes. But most humanities classes did not probe deeply into Japanese culture until recently. Perhaps those journalists had graduated, as I had, with little knowledge of Asian culture.

Like many teachers who felt a *kamikaze* (divine wind—not suicide squad!) gathering momentum as America slipped from the 1980's into the insecure 1990's, I began to reevaluate my course offerings for relevancy. My "what-ifs" kept intruding on the juggling act I call evaluating a year's instruction for improvement. "What if" I did not teach *Candide* or *Don Quixote*, but substituted Oriental selections instead? Would my students' education suffer? "What if" members of my curriculum committee did not approve of my

variation from the traditional canon of American, European, and British classics? Would I have sufficient evidence to convince them that my literary scope and sequence needed to broaden as America's political, social, and economic interests had? "What if" I announced an expansion of my scope and sequence and then could not teach Oriental literature effectively because of my lack of training? Would my expertise in American, British, and European literature so contrast with my inexperience in Oriental literature that my students might conclude that Western literature enjoyed a superiority to its Eastern counterpart?

Alistair Cooke notes in *America* that American society remains vital because America is a "rousingly complicated place," full of arguable contradictions (389). Using this idea as a crutch, I tentatively ventured into Japanese and Chinese authors, relying mostly on textbook information. While pondering methods for improving my knowledge of Oriental literature, I received a brochure

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from the National Endowment for the Humanities advertising a six-week summer seminar on Japanese culture and literature. "Four Texts and Japanese Culture" would be taught at California State University at Sacramento by John W. Connor—author, professor of anthropology,

Fulbright scholar, and World War II Japanese-Occupational General Headquarters staff member to General Douglas MacArthur. A zephyr had wafted an opportunity in my direction; I applied for the seminar and became one of fifteen participants who began a fascinating odyssey into the Japanese mind.

One of our major considerations in the seminar concerned the distinction between the American concept of happiness and the Japanese adherence to *giri* or duty. Dr. Connor's *Tradition and Change in Three Generations of Japanese Americans* provides a comparison/contrast of Japanese and American values. For example, Americans emphasize the rights and accomplishments of the "individual." Advertised as the land of opportunity, America values the individual's right to compete, to struggle, to achieve "individually" set goals. In contrast, the Japanese emphasize group-set goals and "group accomplishments." Proper behavior requires suppression of individual successes in favor of those decided by group consensus or by hierarchic order.

Japanese life involves balancing *on* (obligations) with *giri* (duties), especially to the individual's group as well as immediate and extended family. In *As the Japanese See It: Past and Present*, Aoki and Dardess explain *giri* as an outgrowth of Confucian religious principles based on obligatory relationships originating from birth order, family position, marriage, friendships, and patriotism even though,

of these only the relationship between friends was equal; the others represented the mutual obligations of a superior and an inferior. The highest value was placed on loyalty to one's ruler and filial piety to one's parents. (5)

Because literature serves a didactic function in Japanese society, the virtues of *giri* often contrast with the dangers of *ninjo* or emotional desires. In the bunraku puppet play *Chushingura*, Moronao's powerful political position flames his hubris. His petulant temper, verbal abuse of samurai warriors, and attempts to sexually coerce a married woman evidence his loss of commitment to his duty and his excess of *ninjo*. His imbalance disturbs his immediate society by causing emotional pain to those who unsuccessfully try to neutralize his emotional immaturity. The play's moral emerges when Moronao's selfish hedonistic interests foil Japanese codes of loyalty, honor, and self-discipline.

Similarly, classical Japanese movies such as *Gate of Hell* or perhaps *The Life of Oharu* study the evils which ripple through society when individual pleasures displace compromise and group-

set accomplishments. For example, in *Gate of Hell*, Moritoh violates social etiquette by impulsively falling in love with a woman before he knows her family's background. Unfortunately for his emotional commitment, the woman, Kesa, is already married and belongs to a different social class than he. Using a type of Western ethic that "love conquers all," Moritoh aggressively pursues Kesa even after he realizes their relationship is doomed. Kesa teaches Moritoh the dangers of *ninjo* and the values of *giri* by manipulating her own death at his hands, thereby destroying his will.

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The Life of Oharu follows the disintegration of a family unit after a samurai's daughter forgets her duty to her father and emperor. Her impulsive nature succumbs to a suitor's plea to elope and enjoy instant love. She does not, however, find happiness. Instead, she trades her home in the imperial city for a sleazy "honeymoon hotel." The tragedy of her husband's execution and her forced prostitution teach Oharu the dangers of *ninjo* as she discovers that marriage is not based on pleasures but responsibilities.

In contrast, Tanizaki's novel *The Maktoka Sisters* (1943-48) presents a protagonist reminiscent of the new Japanese princess Masako Owada. Like Owada (age 29), the protagonist Yukiko's biological clock pressures her to marry. Yukiko's family and friends arrange a succession of formal meetings between family members and friends to negotiate marriage arrangements (known as a *mtai*). During the negotiations, points to be investigated and discussed include family history and economics, social status and embarrassments, genetic heritage, health or physical problems, and attitudes toward politics and child-rearing. Journalists report that Owanda met Naruhito at a *mtai* staged by the imperial family to introduce the prince to forty eligible females (Powell 31). Because marriage links families and not just individuals in Japan, families remain more active in choosing a mate and making arrangements for the mate's integration into his/her duties in the new family.

A practiced, sombre, slightly sad, and shy facial expression remains another similarity between Owada and Tanizaki's protagonist Yukiko. Even though the fictitious Yukiko, like the real-life Owada, has not been sheltered from life or education, Tanizaki describes Yukiko's public facial expression as "the beauty, fragile and elegant, of the sheltered maiden of old, the maiden who had never known the winds of the world" (35). Yukiko, like Owada, favors brightly colored kimonos; however, unlike Owada, Yukiko has always worn a kimono. In contrast, news reports and TV talk shows relish contrasting the before-and-after transformation of Owada from the Western-dressed sophisticate to kimono-clad ingenue.

Both Yukiko and Owada, as descendants of samurai warriors, exemplify the code of *bushido*. Although today samurai warriors only exist in movies such as *Hara Kiri* or *Yojimbo*, the warriors' tenets have been transmitted to succeeding generations much as our American Adam myth has penetrated the American ethic through stories of Johnny Appleseed and Natty Bumppo, or movies starring John Wayne, Sylvester Stallone or Clint Eastwood. Much like the American Adam concept, *bushido* incorporates ideals based on the courage and self-control to do the right deed, to show concern for the needs of others and to demonstrate personal integrity and loyalty. So important is the code of *bushido* that Joseph Campbell called it "the soul of Japan" (500). Based on Buddhist, Confucian, and Zen principles, *bushido* emphasizes accepting and executing one's duty, often by performing some act. That act may involve financial, personal, or physical sacrifice which benefits the extended family or society. Of concern is the focus on the well-being of the group and not the pleasure or discomfort of the individual.

This importance of the "greater good" pairs with the Japanese belief in *mono no aware*, the transitoriness of life and its cyclical, but brief, moments of beauty. Emphasizing the world's momentary comforts and pleasures, *mono no aware* also serves as a motif in Japanese literature. For example, the medieval classic *The Ten-Foot Square Hut* or *The Hojoki* uses *mono no aware* to compare man's life to the movements and transitions of nature:

Ceaselessly the river flows, and yet the water is never the same, while in the still pools the shifting foam gathers and is gone, never staying for a moment. Even so is man and his habitation. (Sadler 1)

To a culture that believes in life as a repeating series of reincarnations, each carrying karmic implications from preceding lives, Japanese culture deemphasizes the present life with reminders that human life is evanescent. Viewing the moon, watching cherry blossoms fall, and lamenting the fall of red maple leaves evidence a continuing Japanese belief in *mono no aware*. A scene in the movie version of *The Makioka Sisters* (Sasame Yukl, 1983) visually captures this concept by juxtaposing a weeping man with butterfly-puffy, white snowflakes tumbling rapidly from the sky and submerging into the river beneath his window. Life's hopes, pains, and joys also submerge and whirl into that recurring and sometimes turbulent stream called life.

Scott Willis's June 1993 article in *ASCD Update* reports on Emory University's Eleanor York Johnson's thoughts on the need for cross-cultural teacher education in the United States:

Trainees may learn information about the new culture, learn to think as people in the new culture do, and learn appropriate social behaviors. (Willis 5)

Although the N.E.H.-sponsored seminar I attended in Sacramento was not the "immersion experience" advocated by Johnson (Willis 5), six weeks of focused attention on Japanese culture, led by master teacher John W. Connor, fostered an interest and appreciation for Eastern philosophy, life concepts, and societal norms. The participants became familiar with Japanese authors such as Kawabata and Mishima; with their American translators Donald Keene, A.L. Sadler, and Edward G. Seidensticker; and with historians Edwin O. Reischauer and H. Paul Varley. Four seminar members who had lived in Japan shared anecdotes. One presented a lesson in calligraphy, an art she had begun studying while teaching in Japan. Finally, our weekly eating visits to some of Sacramento's more than one hundred Japanese restaurants taught those of us who do not live in a culturally diverse area the art of maneuvering sushi and tempura with chopsticks. Because I received training in Oriental literature, my students this year received better preparation for a world which increasingly demands the ability to function in both Eastern and Western cultures. That wind of cultural change, whether a zephyr or a *kamikaze*, maneuvers humanities teachers into a position which demands they interpret "the Japanese part of it."

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