6 February 1981, Volume 211, Number 4482

SCIENCE

East Is East and West Is West

In attitudes toward other countries, Americans are often remarkably parochial. We assume that others share or at least ought to share our beliefs and values. We would do well to remember the words of Rudyard Kipling, "East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet."

A typical tourist visiting Japan could easily conclude that the country has gone far toward becoming like the United States. The procedures at Nerita are much like those at any major international airport. In the streets of Tokyo there is the familiar sight of rushing automobiles. Modern hotels are very similar to those in the United States. Indeed, in Kyoto, the old imperial capital, one can stay in a Holiday Inn and partake of McDonald's hamburgers. A golf driving range there is open until late hours. Perhaps the most obvious indication of Americanization is the Coca Cola signs, which are ubiquitous.

But stray away from the Western hotel and you will get some different impressions. One aspect of Japanese life in which there has been little change is the role of women. During visits to industrial laboratories, government institutions, and ministries and attendance at scientific sessions I met several hundred professional people. Women were present in offices in clerical positions. They appeared bearing cups of tea. They were present, but segregated, in one phase of a color television assembly line. But I encountered only two women in professional roles. I was informed that recently, due to a severe shortage of men, some women had been hired to do computer programming. On a number of occasions I was in mixed company when it was necessary to enter a room or an elevator. When I attempted to permit the women present to enter first, awkwardness resulted.

In dealing with each other, animals of many species, including humans, are more or less conscious of pecking order. In the United States there are a few areas, such as diplomacy and the military, in which people are acutely aware of it. But in general we practice the dictum that all men are created equal, and a person who seems too anxious about his or her relative standing is not well regarded.

In Japan the situation is quite different. Status is extremely important, and striving to achieve it begins almost at the cradle. Acute awareness of and behavior according to pecking order persist throughout life. This is reinforced by the structure of the language. Conjugation of verbs and forms of personal pronouns are dependent on the relative status of the people involved in a conversation. There are as many as 93 forms (some archaic) of the personal pronouns "I" and "me." With social structure embedded in the language, it is hardly likely that changes will occur quickly.

Interestingly, rigidity in the pecking order is accompanied by an unusual cohesiveness of the people and a practice of consulting persons high or low who would be affected by a decision. There is a very strong tendency to conciliate rather than litigate. One measure of this is that in Japan there are fewer than 12,000 lawyers, while in the United States there are about 500,000. In the United States, the relatively large number of lawyers seems to encourage conflict and friction rather than to resolve it amicably. A Japanese lawyer told me that in Japan a typical contract between two parties might involve a paragraph or two, but that in the United States a comparable matter might involve 200 pages in an attempt to foresee all possible contingencies. He said that in Japan, if contingencies arise, the parties share some sake and work out an equitable agreement. In environmental matters, where the Japanese have made more progress than we have, again there has been conciliation instead of prolonged litigation. For centuries, the Japanese have lived in crowded, isolated circumstances, and the present culture was shaped by those conditions. We may not like or approve of all their customs, but they seem to suit the Japanese well.—PHILIP H. ABELSON