

JINSEI ANNAL



"LIFE'S GUIDE"

*Glimpses
of Japan
through a popular
advice
column*

JOHN A. McKINSTRY

&

ASAKO NAKAJIMA McKINSTRY

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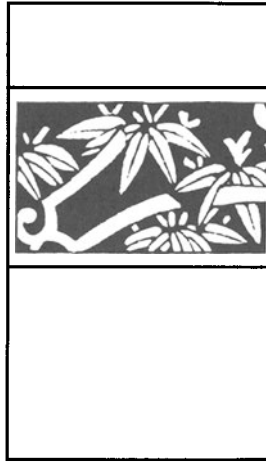
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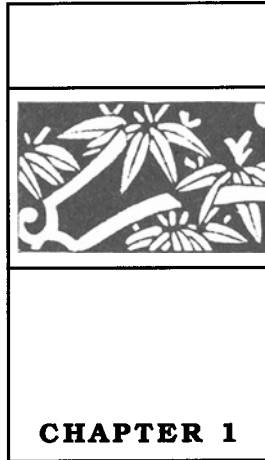
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John A. McKinstry
Asako Nakajima McKinstry
Pismo Beach, California

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**INTRODUCTION:
AN ADVICE
COLUMN AS A
MIRROR OF
JAPANESE
CULTURE?**

THE TWO OF US, a Japanese and an American, set out to write this small book with several specific goals in mind. For some time both of us had been looking for a way to explore situations and problems facing ordinary Japanese people and to share our own insights concerning these situations with people outside of Japan. We wanted to look briefly into some of the interesting differences between the two cultures in a more, what we might call, “colloquial” manner than is usually done. We decided that one interesting route into some of the more intimate areas of Japanese society, one that would provide background for analyzing certain aspects of everyday life, would be through a favorite piece of reading for both of us, *Jinsei Annai*, the column that appears daily in the most popular newspaper in Japan.

Jinsei Annai, “Life’s Guide,” is an advice column appearing in the double-page *Kazoku to Kurashi* “Family and Life” section of the morning edition¹ of the *Yomiuri Shimbun*, one of Japan’s big three national newspapers. Our concept entailed reading over carefully about a year’s

worth of the column to see in what ways it reflected significant points of stress in modern Japanese society.

At first this would seem to be a strange method of trying to better understand another way of life, and a couple of questions come immediately to mind. How much useful information could there be in a newspaper advice column? Would it really be possible, for example, for someone to gather any deeper understanding of American society by reading through, say, a year of the Ann Landers column?

Obviously, as a source of information, this type of material is limited; the answer to questions like the above would depend on the way the column was used. After all, the Ann Landers column—that is, the kinds of problems and situations that are brought to it, and the way these problems are responded to—is very American, and it certainly could provide insight into some of the ways Americans interpret life, into the particular kinds of things Americans worry most about, and into current points of tension in society that surface as personal problems for average people.

As anonymous appeals to the wisdom of a kind of community Dutch uncle, advice columns are useful indicators of the common mentality of a society. Both writers and respondents are generally in agreement as to how decent folk ought to behave, and in writing back and forth all parties reinforce the underlying principles that tie a society together. Certain kinds of romantic expectations of a particularly American type, for example, are as naturally expressed in Ann Landers-type columns as in any source available, and one could gather a great deal of information about what Americans feel it is like to be parents of teenagers by reading them.

Opinions expressed in these popular forums are bound to reflect many of the pressures for change in a society, and in fact, it is changing circumstances and the resulting confusion about how people are supposed to live their lives that lie at the heart of advice columns just about everywhere.

We are aware that a great many people associate the Ann Landers-type column with light comedy. Depending on the selection of letters and the advice, and depending even more on the overall intent, such a column could be used to depict any society as a collection of hysterical morons.

Turning popular culture of that sort into parody is not only easy, it takes a conscious effort to resist doing so. Nevertheless, the purpose here is to review a series of pieces somewhat similar to an Ann Landers column, but with a rather more dignified image in their Japanese context, not at all as parody, but as serious cultural analysis.

Perceptions of Japan: Japanese and Western

As we proceeded with our task, we were aware of the problem of false comparisons, and we have tried to explain the cultural context of letters and replies. These kinds of columns are not normally published in English versions of Japanese newspapers; they are clearly intended to be kept within the Japanese national family, and are not meant for the eyes of foreigners. We are trying to allow outsiders a peek into the back rooms of the society, not to make the Japanese look silly, but to give a broader range of understanding of Japanese culture and behavior.

By the 1980s a large volume of well-informed information about Japan had begun to spill beyond the confines of groups already committed over the long term to understanding its society and culture. The maelstrom of media attention drawn by the funeral of Emperor Hirohito could not have found the audience it did had it not followed a surge of general interest reporting about Japan during the previous ten years. This is a healthy development; it is high time the English-speaking world began to probe deeper into the details of a nation so completely absorbed in its own destiny. Understandably, this kind of information has tended to come in cycles. Much of it focused on those aspects of Japan that seem most foreign and exotic, reporting the “smell and feel of the place”; interpretations that had always been available, but now brought up to date, and in some cases far more expertly handled. A concurrent wave of interest centered on business and commerce, surveying the reasons for Japan’s great economic success. The death of Hirohito brought on a reflective mood both inside and outside of Japan, and all kinds of examinations of recent Japanese history resulted. Inevitably a kind of second look—actually just a closer look—has come to characterize general interest reporting about Japan, giving those cooped up in academe a chance to show their stuff with a suddenly larger and more alert audience. A seemingly

one-dimensional Japan is giving way to a more complex place, with real tensions and real problems to accompany its undeniably real successes.

This analysis of *Jinsei Annai* is in its small way a part of that closer look.

Japan in particular can be difficult to understand. Since it is a part of the modern world, yet does not spring directly from the Western tradition, whenever non-Japanese think about the nature of the society there is often a tendency toward polarization: it is either the industrialized Japan, "just like us," or the Japan of mystery and secret insights, the Japan of the ninja and of the five rings of Musashi Miyamoto.²

A pitfall in interpreting Japan in the former way is that since it has all the trappings of a modern society—subways, high-rise buildings, well-dressed people with late-model cars—it can easily be dismissed as just another advanced society. According to this way of thinking, they couldn't beat us so they *did* join us. In other words, Japan has lost much of its heritage because now the Japanese have adopted a way of life congruent with all the problems and characteristics of any other advanced industrial nation.

Although, as we explain below, this certainly is not the way most Japanese see themselves, there is a certain strain in native academic circles that sees Japan in this way. Some Japanese intellectuals become very impatient whenever the subject of Japanese uniqueness is raised. As far as they are concerned a culture is formed by its economic system, and modern Japan is essentially a product of the forces of capitalism. Certainly such people are in a position to know Japan well. But some of what these Japanese intellectuals write and say about Japan being just like any other modern society is so obviously untrue, especially to a non-Japanese student of Japan, that one wonders how otherwise intelligent people can seriously carry on this way. It turns out that this perspective usually stems from a fierce loyalty and commitment to the basic ideas of Marxism, and a determination to apply them to Japan whether they fit or not.

We don't need to remind Americans or Europeans of how successful Japan has been in manufacturing and selling products on international markets. Except for such things as the size of their living quarters and other factors that depend on unchangeable geographic conditions, the Japanese standard of living is now surpassing that of the United States.

Huge public works projects, such as the enormous bridge complex connecting the island of Honshu and Shikoku, have now, or will certainly in the near future, become the most impressive in the world by any engineering and cost standards. In spite of all this, Japan is Japan; it is modern on its own terms and in its own ways. In some interesting ways it has its own manner of resisting what outsiders would normally consider modern.

It is not easy to keep track of even the major themes of any modern society. Nations like the United States and Japan are battlegrounds where the pressures for change fight it out with the forces of tradition. In contemporary Japan, tradition has been a little more successful in holding off some forms of change, and in one sense this makes it an especially interesting player of the game of modernization. The pressures tend to build up like the area around an earthquake fault and create manifestations of all sorts of deep frustration on the one hand, and frantic conservatism on the other. An example of this is the issue of the treatment of women in the work force. Women's magazines lash out at the male establishment, but at the same time almost as much space in the popular media is given to the argument that women should give up the idea of working in serious career-type jobs and stay at home and take care of their children. This latter point of view is more powerful in Japan than in the United States both in the number of its proponents and in the prestige of its spokesmen.

These days Americans tend to think of Japan as the home of high-tech, and therefore many probably consider it as a place where state-of-the-art technology characterizes the way everything is done. It would surprise people with this view to discover just how old-fashioned certain ways of doing things are in Japan. True, in cities and towns many Japanese do their grocery shopping in somewhat scaled down versions of the American supermarket, but a great many retail sales are still handled through tiny family-run stores, some of them so basic as to operate without a cash register.

Most people in the West have heard something about the super-efficient Japanese manufacturing corporations with their extensive use of robots; they exist all right, but they exist side by side with smaller manufacturing companies whose simple methods of mainly handwork resemble something out of 1920s' America. In the social realm, although

changes during the past several decades have been dramatic, Japan has proven to be even more resistant to some of the social themes that accompanied modernization in Europe and the United States. Certain aspects of personal and family life in this modern economic giant have the feel of the late-nineteenth or early-twentieth-century West. The three-generation residence unit, for example, is still the norm in Japan. About 80 percent of married couples over sixty-five years of age live with adult children and nearly 85 percent of the single elderly do so. Corresponding figures for the United States and Britain are 17 percent for couples and 37 percent for single elderly, and 28 percent for couples and 39 percent for singles respectively.³

Taking the “just like us” view too seriously would leave one helpless and perpetually bewildered in trying to understand Japan. Japan is a modern society, but only in relatively superficial ways are Americans and Japanese really very similar.

The system of higher education is a case in point. Among the major nations of the world, only Japan and the United States put such a large percentage of their citizens in and through universities.⁴ Universities in the two nations look much alike, and spending time around a Japanese university an American will likely feel right at home. Students studying in the libraries and walking around campus between classes; it all looks so completely familiar. But for a person who learns the ropes in the American university system and then teaches for a time in a Japanese university, the experience can be downright bewildering. Moving up the ranks, for example, is largely a matter of personal loyalty, without much to do with the quality and quantity of research. It would take too much space to explain more of the important differences here; we will simply state that except for the scenes of campus life, in other words, the view from the outside, everything is different, and in some ways fundamentally different.

Contrary to the “all the modern world is one big family” perception is the notion that Japan is so unique that it can never be understood in the light of normal human experiences. This view has both native and foreign versions, and it has been used to both condemn and praise Japan. According to this concept, Japan is a place where people are not just different, but intrinsically different, with strange characteristics and qualities not

found elsewhere, as if the Japanese were descendants of some extraterrestrial race. The ugly underbelly of this view fed Hollywood's Japan-bashing period of the forties and fifties when Japanese were depicted as devoid of almost all human qualities.

These days this theory is usually expressed through its positive manifestation, with the Japanese possessing various forms of baffling and unexplainable superiority. In the mid-1980s, Jerry Brown, the former governor of California, enjoyed an extended stay in the Tokyo suburb of Kamakura, reportedly receiving lessons in meditation from Zen monks. We have no idea what Mr. Brown was up to, but whatever he was doing in Japan, it fits in perfectly with the image many Westerners have of Japan as relief from the ordinary, a mysterious place full of magical oriental powers, some of which, as in the movie *Karate Kid*, with the proper dedication, might even be coaxed out of one of these fascinating, if inscrutable, creatures.

As a student in Japan years ago, the American in this collaboration made friends with several young foreigners who had gone there searching for a spiritual oasis, a land free of the pressures and conflicts that had made them unhappy at home. Japan represented for some of these romantic Americans and Europeans a retreat where a more authentic perception of life somehow overruled baser urges of selfishness or materialism.

Today, the images foreigners get from Japan don't inspire quite as much of that kind of naïve thinking, but their visualizations are often, in their own way, still just as misguided. It is certainly true that part of Japan's climb to its current status of economic superpower has drawn on traditional assets. People there work hard, they tend to identify strongly with the organizations they belong to, and they take a rather long-term view of success. But these characteristics are certainly not unique; qualities like these have surfaced in many places and in many times. Moreover, such characteristics are not always unmixed blessings. Falling in line and focusing huge amounts of energy on well-defined goals can indeed achieve great things, but it can also lead to tragic myopia and eventually to disaster, witness war and defeat for Japan in 1945.

Many Japanese seem to enjoy the feeling that they are set quite apart from every other human group. The opinion of the Marxist intellectuals mentioned above notwithstanding, the average Japanese seems to be con-

vinced that no foreigner could ever really come to understand and participate in what they perceive to be an especially subtle system of feeling and communication. Most Japanese seem to have accepted without any doubt whatsoever the theory put forth a few years ago by a Japanese psychologist that brain functions for Japanese operate in a completely different way from those of all other people.⁵ According to this interpretation of brain physiology, when Japanese think and speak, they do so with the right hemisphere of the brain, as opposed to the "left-brainness" of non-Japanese. The theory was accepted so uncritically, not because of all the convincing research, but because it gives legitimacy to a pride many Japanese feel, often quite unconsciously, in being so different from all other people.

The way non-Japanese are generally portrayed in Japanese movies and plays inadvertently reveals the conviction that the other people who share the world with them tend to be simpler, less complicated, more direct, and even, although most would deny it, in a way childlike. These characteristics are not by any means always put in a negative light: Japanese often express admiration for the openness and directness they imagine permeates life in most other societies, but the fact remains that Japanese interpersonal relations are widely believed to constitute a complex secret code too subtle and complicated for outsiders to crack.

All these views have some truth to them, yet at the same time all of them are misleading. Economic systems such as advanced capitalism inevitably do produce a degree of commonality of lifestyle. Middle-class Japanese and middle-class Americans are in some ways brothers and sisters under the skin. Both are bombarded with information, watching and being influenced by what they see on television, which is pretty much free to report and amuse as it sees fit. Both think and talk about politics in remarkably similar ways: highly critical of government, but not much afraid of it. Both make decisions about how to spend relatively the same amount of money in a vast consumer market. Both are quite positive about their lives and are satisfied living in their own society, which they see as imperfect, but the best place to live a fulfilled life. By world standards, both eat well, dress well, know a lot, have considerable personal freedoms, and enjoy a broad level of experiences available to only a small elite in many other places.

Some Western visitors to Japan are downright disappointed with what they find all too familiar, including such things as the Japanese diet, which has incorporated many eating habits from the West. For them modern Japan is not “Japanese” enough; in their view the Japanese have surrendered a beautiful culture for the humdrum of Western existence.

But Japan is not a movie set; it has not been established for the amusement of outsiders, and what interests foreigners about Japan are not always the things that appeal most to the Japanese themselves. If one had to quickly arrange for lessons in karate, for example, better to be in Chicago than Tokyo, where probably a smaller percentage of young people are actually inclined toward such pastimes. If you want to gain the attention of young Japanese, don’t talk about judo, talk about baseball.

Jinsei Annai

Turning our attention back to the subject of this book, the analysis of a Japanese advice column, it becomes particularly important to understand a few of these similarities and differences between the two societies. As a national, as opposed to an American-style regional publication, the *Yomiuri* daily has a circulation larger than any American newspaper. It is completely free from outside interference in what it publishes, and its journalism reflects the highest standards of the modern world. Letters to its column *Jinsei Annai* are randomly selected for publication, and edited only occasionally to shorten them somewhat and to correct grammar and the use of Chinese characters.

Probably the most striking difference between advice columns in Japan and the Dear Abby and Ann Landers sections of American newspapers is the completely serious—really almost somber—tone of both the Japanese letters and the replies. The Japanese have a marvelous sense of humor, but as one might expect it is expressed in ways and in places not always corresponding to the way humor is expressed elsewhere. The glib, sometimes plainly smart-aleck tone of replies to letters to Ann Landers is never seen in Japanese advice columns.

Well-known advice columnists in the United States become celebrities by revealing their personalities and expressing themselves in highly personal ways. Americans expect to be as much entertained as informed

by these columns, and many readers would be disappointed if the frequent wisecracks were to disappear.

In Japan, the whole tone of advice columns is completely different. Personality is all but absent in replies; in fact for most advice columns the letters are not written to a person at all, but to the column itself. Each letter published in *Jinsei Annai* is answered by one of a regular staff of respondents selected by the newspaper. Writers do not know exactly who will answer their letter if it is published, and there are never any requests for a particular respondent.

There is another, maybe even more fundamental way in which advice columns in Japan deviate from the manner in which they've come to function in the United States. Perhaps a large percentage of letters to Ann Landers or Dear Abbey really are sincere requests for advice, but the majority of letters are simply ways of letting off steam concerning some issue or other, often one raised by an earlier letter to the column. Writers know of course that if their letters are printed the columnist will reply, but expressing one's opinion quite often seems the main motive for writing. Letters to Dear Abbey or Ann Landers frequently ask the columnist for their opinion, but one gets the definite impression that most letters are written after the writers have already made up their minds, and that their opinions will not change no matter what the columnist says.

With rare exceptions Japanese who write to advice columns are not looking for a place merely to air grievances. Almost all letters to advice columns end with phrases such as, *Gojōgen onegaishimasu*, "Please advise," or *Dō shitara yoi deshoka*, "What should I do?" Most people who write to the column are seriously seeking advice and they turn to the column for this purpose alone.

Most of the respondents for these columns are identified as *sakka*, "writer," or *hyōronka*, "critic." Both terms have a similar meaning; they denote successful men and women of letters—novelists, essayists, commentators. People with these titles are always being interviewed on television, and their opinions are taken seriously. Such people are deeply respected; it seems to be accepted that they have valuable insight into just about everything.⁶ Because of this, advice columns play a different role and enjoy a notably higher status in Japan.

It is true that a large percentage of college-educated Japanese would