**Anne Thelle: *Typically Japanese***

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Sample translation

**Himeji**

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Himeji is situated one hour’strain ride southwest of Kyoto, and the moment you step onto the platform, you’ll realise what this city is famous for. At the end of a long boulevard, on top of a lush hill, Himeji Castle towers upwards like an enormous beacon. Like so many other cities in Japan, Himeji was developed around the castle complex of a samurai clan**.** These castles were erected between 1185 and 1868 in what is known as the feudal period, when the country was controlled by military leaders. If you make the trek up to the castle, you will learn a huge amount of exciting information, not just about Japanese history, but also about modern-day Japanese society. Although the feudal system was abolished more than a hundred years ago, its strict rules have lived on in Japanese culture. They can be seen in the social structure of the country, as well as the Japanese people’s preoccupation with status and hierarchy.

(Photo; Fujifjellet - Mount Fuji.

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Hierarchy:

In a hierarchical society, everyone knows who is the most important and who has the most power. Everyone is ranked in comparison with one another.

Himeji castle was constructed in the beginning of the 1300s, yet has been well-preserved, unlike many other castles in Japan. That it should remain standing after so many years, long after having fulfilled its role, is remarkable. In 1868, the Meiji restoration led to the dissolution of the Tokugawa shogunate. Castles lost their status, and many were demolished. Himeji castle was abandoned in 1871, and eventually auctioned off. A man from Himeji bought the property for just 23 yen (Equal to around 200,000 yen today, or roughly 2500 dollars). What a steal! The buyer had planned to knock down the castle and develop its plot, but it swiftly became clear that the costs of demolition would be too high. Because of this, the castle was spared. Since then, the castle has stayed standing despite huge earthquakes and the town’s intense bombing during World War II. This is why we are still able to visit the castle and see Japan’s old feudal system with your own eyes.

**The World of the Samurai and the Daimyō**

A feudal system is one where the power in society is shared out between a small number of local leaders. Japan had already begun developing a feudal society during the Heian Period, which lasted between the years 794 and 1185, when the emperor’s power slowly began transferring into the hands of a few influential families. Rich landowners with political influence started to fight among themselves, and soon required protection. This led to the development of military powers, which consisted of small, localised armies. The soldiers were known as *bushi* or *samurai*, and their leaders were called the *daimyō.* The daimyō erected huge castles in their territories, and any individual who swore loyalty to them was protected. When the leader Tokugawa leyasu managed to establish his rule over the whole of Japan in 1603, he rewarded himself with the title *Shōgun*, ruler of all the daimyō.

[Photo: (The Himeji castle towers over the city]

**Hierarchy and rank - who should bathe first?**

If you visit a Japanese home, you will see up close how the feudal period’s samurai culture still affects daily life in Japan. Imagine, for example, that you visit the home of your Japanese friend. You have just finished dinner, and the mother of the family announces that she has just finished filling the bathtub.

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She asks if you would like to take a bath. As a guest, it is natural that you should be invited to use the bathwater first. But perhaps you should know something about Japanese bathing etiquette first… In Japan, it’s wrong for each person to fill the bathtub, remove the plug and fill it again for the next person. Instead, the bathwater is supposed to be shared by the whole family, so it’s very bad form to fill it with mud, grit and soapy water. When people take a bath in Japan, they have to scrub their whole body clean first, then rinse off all of the soap, before they can slip into the warm water to relax. Nearly all bathtubs are connected to a gas heater, so they can stay nice and warm for several hours.

But when the guest is finished with their bath, who comes next? There is a clear pecking order in families and the person ranked highest always takes the first bath. First dad, then the children. Older children come first, and boys before girls. This runs all the way down the ranks, until, once everyone has finished, mum has her turn. These rules are still followed in traditional homes and they can lead to a mother having to wait long into the night before taking her bath, since the bathing process can’t begin until the father of the family has come home from work. Not all families adhere equally to this system, but respect for one’s elders is an intrinsic part of Japanese society. Children refer to their older siblings as *oniisan* (older brother) or *oneesan* (older sister), and the friends of older siblings are also referred to as *oniisan* or *oneesan*. This pecking order in families is linked to the class system introduced by samurai culture, and with the Confucian philosophy that inspired the system.

**Confucianism**

Confucianism is based on the teachings of Kung Fu-tse, also known as Confucius, who lived around 500 BC. His philosophy tells us that there can only be order, balance and harmony in the world when everyone knows their place. He tells us how: “Ruling is when the prince is a prince and the minister is a minister. When the father is a father and the son is a son.” People’s relationship to each other is therefore crucial in Confucian thought, and according to Kung Fu-tse, there are five types of these relationships: The monarch is above the minister, the father is above the son, man is above wife, older brothers are above younger brothers, and the relationship between friends is equal. A ruler must rule well in order to inspire loyalty in his subjects, but as long as he does so, they must be loyal to him.

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**Class Division in the Feudal Period - Warriors in charge**

Confucian hierarchy was integral to feudal Japan. Society was divided into strictly segregated classes. At the top were the military forces - the shōgun, the daimyō and the samurai. Beneath them were the peasants, then the craftsmen, then, at the bottom of the heap, the merchants. It may seem surprising that the peasantry came before merchants, but Japan’s class system was based on the confucian ideal that your worth be measured according to your contribution to society. For this reason, fathers, fishermen and other groups in the primary sector of the economy were more important than both craftsmen and merchants.

Theoretically, class mobility should have been impossible, but reality didn’t always live up to the ideology behind the class system. The truth of the matter was that many of the merchants were extremely wealthy. Because of this, they ended up enjoying both respect and influence in society, even though, in theory, they should have been seen as the lowest of the low. Furthermore, there was a vast difference among the peasantry between those who owned their own land, and those who didn’t.

When the Tokugawa shogunate came to an end in 1868, the feudal system was abolished. The shōguns had lost their power, so the samurai class was dissolved and replaced with a modern army. There were no longer strict rules segregating peasants, craftsmen and merchants from one another. Yet people’s attitudes to one another weren’t going to change overnight, and neither was the logic behind the feudal class system. Confucianism continued to have a strong influence on social interaction in Japan, and not just in the family model. At school, in the workplace and at home - everyone knew whether they were superior or inferior, depending on their age and how long they’d been in their position. And this is still the case today.

**Hierarchy in the workplace:**

At work, just as in schools, sports teams and other organisations, it’s customary to differentiate between *senpai* and *kōhai*. Senpai are the older people, the people who have been there the longest, and are therefore ranked highest. A kōhai is younger and less experienced. Often, new pupils at school will show respect by calling their elders senpai instead of their name. Senpai, on the other hand, will tend to use names when speaking to kōhai. Yet despite the advantages to being a senpai, the role also entails a degree of responsibility.

The social pyramid is not just apparent in people’s names for each other, but also in other linguistic areas. When you speak to another person in Japan, it is essential to know where they stand in relation to you. The language itself must be changed to suit the listener. If the person you’re talking to has higher status, then you should speak ‘upwards’. You should speak formally to them, and use humble forms of the language when you refer to yourself. When you speak to someone with equal status to you, or to younger people, you should use a more neutral language. It is always crucial, therefore, for Japanese people to be able to gauge someone’s social status before beginning a conversation with them. People usually play safe by only ever using polite forms when speaking to strangers. For foreigners trying to learn Japanese, this can be very complicated and overwhelming.

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**Equality?**

So what does this mean for gender equality? According to the Confucian philosophy, men come before women, and boys before girls. Does this mean that boys are more important than girls? Is there equal opportunity for both genders? The family bathing order seems to give the obvious answer. Yet women’s roles in the family haven’t always been like this.

Many historians believe that women had a stronger role in society before Chinese religion and philosophy (such as Confucianism and Buddhism) began influencing Japanese thinking. Since it was only after their first encounter with China that Japanese people began to write things down, it is difficult to decipher what life was like before this influence. There are, however, some things we do know: The most important deity in old Japanese mythology, the Sun goddess Amaterasu, is a woman. There were female leaders, such as Princess Pimiko, who reigned in around 300 AD, her successor Iyo, and then princess Suiko a few centuries later. It has even been claimed that before China’s influence, Japan was a *matrilineal* society, where family names and titles would descend through the mother, not the father.

In addition, even after Confucian ideology and the feudal class system had diminished the social significance of Japanese women, they still had a certain amount of power and status. In Heian-period Japan, ladies-in-waiting learnt how to read and write, women in rural agricultural communities worked on the farm alongside men, and women could even own land. What’s more, under the Tokugawa shogunate, women had more freedoms regarding marriage and divorce than their European sisters.

(Photo: The many female figures in art from the Jomon period tell us that women had an important position in ancient Japan.)

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There can be little doubt, however, that the Confucian idea of men being more important than women has grown strong roots in Japan. In 1875, the philosopher Masanao Nakamura, inspired by Confucianism, coined a philosophy about women called *ryōsai kenbo.* This ideology, which means *good wife, wise mother*, was introduced to the school curriculum, and remained part of the syllabus right up until the end of the second world war. A woman’s place was in the home, and her patriarchal duty was to care for her husband, give birth to children, and raise them to be good citizens.

So what is the situation today? It has been said that the last decades in Japan have been *onna no jidai*, or The Women’s Era, and women have certainly achieved a number of milestones in this time. Women’s suffrage was established in 1946, and from the 1980s onwards, women have secured new positions in society. In the 1986 general election, the largest opposition party, the Social Democratic Party, was led by a woman. In 1991, Ashiya became the first municipality in Japan to elect a female mayor. The same year, women secured the right to one year’s unpaid maternity leave. Even though these have been important steps towards equality, Japanese society is still far from equal.

From its statistics, the country might appear equal: Similar numbers of men and women attend higher education. There are almost as many women as men in paid work. However, these statistics cover up vast inequalities. First of all, there are sizeable differences in the types of higher education that men and women study. Many women enroll in two-year high-school programmes that will only prepare them for future tasks as housewives. Secondly, there are large discrepancies between opportunities for men and women in the job market. While men are offered permanent positions with plenty of room for promotion, many women work in low-paid, part-time posts with fewer rights and worse career prospects. In families with two parents in work, only the mother will have to balance her efforts between two jobs. On average, women spend 5-6 times as long taking care of their children and at least 10 times as long doing housework as their male partners. Compared with the majority of other industrialised countries, Japan is lagging far behind.

(Photo: Far from equal. Mothers spend 5-6 times as long looking after children as fathers.)

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**The Bushido code of the samurai lives on**

Central Japanese principles can also be traced all the way back to feudal Japan, to the samurai code of *Bushido*. Bushido means *the way of the warrior.* The samurai were first and foremost fearless warriors. They rode on horses, fully-armoured, they fought with bows and arrows, and were experts with the sword. You would know that someone was a samurai because they would only be permitted two swords - one long, one short. When war was ravaging Japan, the samurai had to be ready to fight at any moment. Yet during the long-lasting peace brought about by the Tokugawa shogunate in the 1600s, the need for warriors gradually declined. The samurai were forced to find new roles and new tasks for themselves. As part of the governing class, they became skilled administrators and bureaucrats instead.

Modern Japanese martial arts, including judo, karate and kendo, have their roots in the age of the samurai.

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**Japanese values**

GIRI: *Giri* can be loosely translated as *duty* or *obligation*, but the term has much more strong and deep-rooted connotations. Giri binds Japanese people to their superiors, to their employers, and even cements their relationships with family and friends. The term refers to the social obligation that lies at the heart of Japanese relationships. If a friend or colleague does you a favour, your feeling of giri will force you to find a way to reciprocate it**.** If you receive a gift, you have to give a gift in return. At a Japanese wedding, therefore, it’s actually the guests who go home with goody bags! As a result of Japanese gift-giving culture, it is now custom, exactly one month after Valentine’s day, to reciprocate all of one’s gifts. Some have even nicknamed Valentine’s Day’s chocolatey gifts as ‘giri-choco’.

**Face and honour**

In Japanese culture, there is something called *protecting the face*, which means being careful to maintain one’s honour, one’s good name and social standing. If you are insulted or undermined, then it might result in you *losing face*. Stories emerge every now and then about business executives who choose to take their own life because the media has uncovered something negative about their business. Or about fathers who spend whole days in the park because they can’t bring themselves to tell their families they’ve lost their job. These are stories about the fear of losing face, of having one’s true self exposed.

**Tatemae and Honne**

*Tatamae* and *honne* are closely related to the concepts of face and honour. Tatemae means your *facade*, the parts of yourself that you present to the world. Honne means *true feeling*, and refers to what you truly think and feel under your surface. Because it’s so important for people to preserve their honour and face, they see it as normal, and often necessary, to hide their true feelings and wear a kind of mask. This might appear slightly dishonest, but can also function as a very useful code of conduct for close-knit communities.

(Photo: Giving and reciprocating small giftsis crucial to Japan’s gift-giving culture. If you receive a gift, you have to give one in return. )

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They essentially became office workers, and the sword was exchanged for the writing brush.

They still saw themselves as warriors, however, even though they had only ever experienced war in theory. They never stopped training, yet the purpose behind their training changed. Now, it was more about character-building than preparation for armed combat. They continued to use traditional weapons, like the sword or the bow and arrow, but their training became more art than practical skill. Modern Japanese martial arts, such as judo, karate or kendo, have their roots in this samurai training.

Samurai also thought it was essential to drill good warrior values into future generations. The most important principles on which all bushido philosophy rested, were *duty, loyalty,* and *honour.* A samurai should be one hundred percent loyal to his master, the daimyō, should carry out his orders without question. The old custom of samurai taking their own life to follow their master to the grave was forbidden by law in 1663. Yet this principle of boundless loyalty never faltered. Bushido culture lives on in modern Japan, in fundamental Japanese values.

**At school in Japan**

In school, the principles of hierarchy still apply, so students learn clearly to differentiate between senpai and kōhai. Japanese schools are world-renowned for their high achievement in international tests. Japanese students are among the top in the world in terms of literacy, mathematics and science. Schools are free, state-owned institutions, and all Japanese students will spend at least 9 years at school - 6 years in elementary school and then 3 years at junior high school. This education is mandatory. Almost every student, a whopping 95% of them, go on to study at high school level.

School is where children learn how to conform to Japanese society. Emphasis is placed on learning to follow rules, as well as how to work in groups. Japanese elementary schools differ from most school systems in two main respects: Firstly, at mealtimes, it is the children who are responsible for serving up their own food and washing it up afterwards. Secondly, students are made to clean the school themselves. The children all clean up their own classrooms at the end of the day, and clean communal areas, like doors and corridors, between lessons. It’s not hard to imagine that children are much less likely to make a mess or vandalise common areas when they know they will have to clean it all up themselves.

Everyone in Japan has equal rights to education. But that doesn’t mean that everyone gets the same quality of education. Japan is often called a *gakureki shakai*, a society that is divided up accorded to school background (as opposed to a society divided according to class, which Japan used to be). This is due to the way high schools choose their prospective students, as well as what the right high school might mean for a child’s university and career prospects. Nearly all children simply attend the elementary and junior high schools closest to them, but before they can enroll in high school, they have to sit an entrance exam.

The best schools have exceptionally difficult entrance examinations. Nearly half of all junior high students will attend private cram schools - *juku* - after-hours to study for these exams. Some will even have started attending juku by their first year at school! Japanese families can spend vast sums of money on these cram schools.

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Yet, if a student does manage to get accepted into a good high school, they have a much better chance of passing the entrance examinations for the best universities. And if the student is accepted into one of those, they are much more likely to get a job once they graduate. Many firms recruit their new employees directly from these universities.

The best private universities even have their own elementary and junior high schools, and a place at one of these may help to assure that a student will be accepted into these universities. Some private schools even own kindergartens! Yet the state-owned high schools and universities are the best of all, and the chance of being accepted is miniscule. If a child happens to live in an area with good primary schools to prepare them well for these entrance examinations, they’re extremely fortunate. Which school you go to has a huge influence on your future opportunities.

For this reason, many Japanese children may experience an enormous amount of pressure to succeed.

Japanese schools are some of the best in the world academically. But learning about respect and correct behaviour is just as important. When you’re ill, for example, you have to use a face maskso that you don’t infect anyone else!

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In addition to their lessons inside and outside school, students will take part in sports and various other extra-curricular activities. For some, the pressure can become too much. *Gogatsubyō*, or the May disease, is a condition that Japanese psychologists claim to be a result of pressure at school. The illness usually breaks out in May, one month after the beginning of the school year.

Discipline, honour, loyalty and hard work are still the cornerstones of Japanese culture. This applies to school as well. Even though the feudal system was abolished more than a century ago, the old castles, like the one in HImeji, are visible reminders of how the mindset and values of the samurai age remain a part of Japanese society today.

(Photo :Many Japanese children have long days and experience an enormous amount of pressure.)

**Gogatsubyō - The May Disease**

Keisuke is a young high school student. During his last two years at junior high, he spent more than ten hours a week at cram schools, swotting up on maths, english and science. He would often stay up late into the night doing homework. Sometimes he even fell asleep at school. But he’s always been motivated by his one goal - getting into the best high school in the city. After that, his next step will be the Tokyo University entrance examinations and a career in a big firm, like Somitomo or Mitsubishi.

All his hard work means that, at the beginning of April, he can stand proud in his school uniform and enroll in his dream school. At last, he thinks. But soon the truth sets in. Routines and homework, all over again. Going to school doesn’t feel special anymore, if it ever really did. Was this really worth all the effort? What had he actually been working so hard for? Life becomes empty and meaningless, his dreams are all falling apart. He starts feeling restless, becomes unable to sleep and loses his appetite. He begins to get stomach aches and migraines. *Gogatsubyō*, declares the doctor, and recommends him to get a lots of rest, spend more time with friends, and perhaps get back into an old hobby. The doctor tells Keisuke that most people only ever experience Gogatsubyō as a temporary affliction, and explains how he has to manage expectations and try to adapt to his new environment.