

# Politics & World Affairs

## Colonel Isobé's Secret

*The Japanese Formula—By SYDNEY GIFFARD*



THE LAST TIME I met Colonel Isobé, perhaps twenty years ago, he seemed just as jaunty as he had twenty years before that, in those otherwise drab, early post-War Tokyo days. As jaunty, that is, as he had always seemed on arrival for a working session. After twenty minutes or so, he had had a tendency to drift into sleep, to be woken immediately by the crash of *First Lessons in Japanese* as the

book fell from his lap on to the study floor. When this happened, he had always returned, without any explanation, to the beginning of the lesson which we had been attacking. This gave one the opportunity to repeat faultlessly what had been rehearsed so very recently, before the momentary interruption. Such opportunities were one's best hope of earning commendation.

To be sprightly, yet to succumb easily to sleep, was a natural combination in those days, for a gentleman long retired but obliged to make his way through the giant, rattling skeletons of Tokyo and Yokohama, to attend to his students. They were indeed trying times for the elderly, but a smile over some difficulty encountered by his wife was the nearest Colonel Isobé ever came to a complaint. And sprightliness was his usual mode, rather than weariness. He was quicker to spring from his chair and move to stand under the door lintel, whenever there was an earth-tremor, than most of his young pupils. He contrived, without a word, to convey the idea that it was everyone's duty to move sharply into position to withstand any shock which might occur. There was no question of false politeness over seniority or precedence: it was a matter of battle-drill.

I believe that Colonel Isobé never discussed World War II, its causes, its course, or its consequences, with his students, unless strictly in the context, say, of an editorial or item of news under study. Preference for avoiding the subject was perhaps partly why the career of his son had limited

value only, for conversational purposes. Colonel Isobé's own direct experience of active hostilities—occasionally recalled to illustrate briefly some general thesis about the Meiji period—had been of the fighting round Port Arthur in 1904, his rank at that time perhaps Lieutenant, probably in the Imperial Guards. Later, there had been liaison with the British Army, and the gradual establishment of a connection with language students from the British government service and from industry.

This connection had served as a bridge into retirement, and now far beyond. His success as a teacher was based firmly on his refusal to cultivate, certainly to display, any knowledge of the English language beyond what might be necessary in order to arrange the time and place with a beginner, for the initiation of a course of study of uncertain duration.

We never learned his age. He did once disclose to me, with a kind of parade-ground giggle which was one of his characteristic expressions, that the practice adopted in disrespect of unpopular contemporaries, in the days when he was an officer cadet, had been to cut off their top-knots. This might have been the equivalent of *de-bagging* in the British social lexicon of some period not so long before our own time, or of setting fire to the shirt-tails where a future Field Marshal was engaged in the business. But it might be wrong to draw conclusions as to Colonel Isobé's age from the consideration that the style of hairdressing which involved top-knots was made illegal in Japan in 1871.

AT THE TIME of my tutorials with him, Colonel Isobé regarded a student as being ready for whatever examination might be deemed a suitable substitute for a passing-out parade as soon as he could enunciate with confidence the Japanese phrases for hydro-electric power (*suiryoku denki*) and what we should now call inward capital investment (*tōshi dōnyū*). Many years afterwards, still haunted by these phrases, I came to see that they were the names of the two things in all the world most needed by Japan at the time of the Occupation; energy, and funds, for the new take-off.

The current catchphrase has retained its extraordinary influence in Japanese society. It is therefore appropriate that

it should be given its due share of attention by scholars. Japanese is something of a circus performer among languages. Its repertoire of tricks, including so many that are visual, such subtle optical echoes and allusions, is beyond black belt mastery even to most of those born to and schooled in it. Brian Moeran has tackled it recently from its street-wise end, looking as it were at the buskers, the break-dancers of the language, in the Yoyogi Park of cosmopolitan, instant culture; and along the Omote Sandō of youthful, vernacular chic. An enviable combination of lightness of heart with seriousness of purpose is the distinct and distinguished character of *Language and Popular Culture in Japan*.<sup>1</sup>

Professor Moeran betrays some concern lest what he describes as his semi-linguapological approach might prove incompatible with the traditions of scholarship and dignity. In truth, it may rather seem that he has succeeded in bringing the brick and the mortar-board together again. Some of his language would be acceptable on a building site, too, and is not to be despised for that. Some of it is jargon, and that is another matter. But even here he is not to be held responsible for what others have done with the literary heritage of the social sciences. In good substance, he offers insights of originality and bright merit, much simple entertainment, and a modicum of academic disputation. His chapter on the aesthetics of folk crafts (*mingei*), based on his residence among the potters of Sarayama, while it also covers an important episode in the history of modern Japanese art, includes an especially perceptive account of the impact of marketing skills on an artless community, and on their innocent craft. His piece on the poetics of advertising prides further open the door to a rich storehouse of fantasy, wit and degradation. He knows, as well, where pornography begins and ends, and possibly why.

ONE OF Professor Moeran's most helpful achievements is to introduce the reader gently to a network of controversy which is undeniably close to the centre of the attention of students of Japan today. This has to do with *nihonjinron* (discussion of the Japanese, and whether they are simply or uniquely unique) and with the related question of whether it is more useful to study Japanese society primarily in its own terms, or more extensively by methods which rely on comparisons with other societies. The same questions apply to Japanese culture, or cultures, as to the society, if indeed you know how to separate them.

Not everyone finds it easy to read about these problems. But no one communicates the enjoyment which they can offer more infectiously than Professor Moeran. If this enjoyment is more readily accessible to those familiar with the general nature, at least, of the Japanese language, we must be careful not to hold this against him. He is right to stress the great power and influence of the language, which is not to say that it is a language specially designed for the painless communication of abstract thought. He is also right to re-

mind us of the dangers of a certain precious exclusiveness, which used sometimes to infest oriental studies, even if in doing so he ends an admirably deft symphony with a coda trembling on the near edge of portentousness.

TODAY'S SOCIAL SCIENTISTS seem determined to avoid the error attributed by Professor Moeran to yesterday's orientalists. Judged by *Constructs for Understanding Japan*, the published proceedings of the International Colloquium of the Comparative Study of Japanese Society held at Noosa Heads, Queensland, early in 1982,<sup>2</sup> they have called in question every popular explanation of Japan's 'post-War success which has resulted from the researches of near-experts, and a good deal of holy writ deriving from more venerable sources.

This book pitches the reader into the thorniest thickets which surround the controversies so brilliantly skated over by Professor Moeran. Their surface turns out not to have been thin, as in the proverb, but so solid as to require the use of the kind of heavy ice-breaker more proper to Sovietologists navigating during the Cold War. It is well worth sending for one of these painstaking vessels, and settling down to a voyage of rare and exotic beauty, if indeed you can bring yourself to look out across the great tundra of jargon. Precious riches lie below the permafrost of these forbidding pages. The editors contribute an introduction (which has the merit of speaking clearly against everything which they might wish to label too Westernly ethnocentric) and an ominously labelled paper on social classes in Japan ("A Multi-dimensional View of Stratification: A Framework for Comparative Analysis"). It is devoutly to be hoped that readers will not let themselves be repelled by this or other awesome titles and phrases. The editor-authors are out to demonstrate, in their latter paper, that the common belief that 90% of the Japanese people are content to regard themselves as belonging to the middle class is at best a gross oversimplification and at worst a travesty: and they are surely right.

Other papers in this tough-looking, terrifyingly named, squat book score massively against a team of other overweight misconceptions and clumsy generalisations. It is proposed in these papers, for example, that individual self-interest is not lacking in supposedly group-oriented Japan; that groups themselves, or circles or arcs, where they exist, are not simple, hierarchical structures; that conjugal and other family relationships are not set in some indestructible Japanese mould; that notions of the wider society are flexible; that the deprived may be learning how to stand up for their putative rights; that parliamentary democracy has a certain validity in Japan; that industrial relations there may resemble features of those in other industrialised countries more closely than has usually been assumed; and so on. Such propositions are refreshing, and for the most part the arguments are persuasively presented.

The jargon, heralded by the title, remains. The expression "white-collarization" may stand as representative of a pervasive character which might drive honest readers, even potential enthusiasts, clean away. Yet the concept of the "white-

<sup>1</sup> *Language and Popular Culture in Japan*. By BRIAN MOERAN. Manchester University Press, £29.95.

<sup>2</sup> *Constructs for Understanding Japan*. Edited by YOSHIO SUGIMOTO and ROSS E. MOUER. Kegan Paul International, £45.00.

collarization" of workers in Japanese industry proves to be of very considerable interest. When the jargon is applied to aspects of methodology, rather than of Japanese society, we may sense a threat of hypothermia. Yet this reader, for one untutored example, found Professor Befu's paper on "The *Emic-Etic* Distinction and Its Significance for Japanese Studies" entirely lucid, highly enjoyable, and notably wise in its conclusions. Professor Neustupný and his typologies speak more emphatically for the benefit of those further up or down the learning curve, whichever it may be (along, perhaps; even round). All the more desirable to avoid leaving the suspicion that this book may be a case of the unreadable in pursuit of the inscrutable. It makes a number of unmistakably valuable contributions to Japanese studies, and asks some fundamental questions about the nature of these studies and about our approach to a complex of relationships on whose development our future must in some measure depend.

IF IT IS GOOD to see revisionists at work on established preconceptions of Japan, one must also be prepared to meet new explanations of the phenomenon of Japanese success, with critical appraisal. *The Enigma of Japanese Power*,<sup>3</sup> a new general theory, is founded upon Karel van Wolferen's two or three decades' experience of the country. In part, it is a lively and good-humoured guide to the principal features and institutions of Japanese society. As an anatomy of Japan, it has some outstanding merits. It looks behind the annual report, the brochure, the party line, the consensus, the received wisdom and all manner of handouts. The eye is observant, but not without sympathy; sharp, but not cold. The style is accomplished, highly readable.

Here is another author who professes to be against any idea that Japan might be uniquely unique. He will tolerate no excuses offered on this basis, and warns his readers strongly against the Japan apologist, the obfuscatory sycophant, and the placatory diplomatist. For all his sympathy, he seems to see Japan primarily as a menace. This is not because of any conscious conspiracy among and between the leading estates of the polity, not because of the sheer strength of an imaginary Japan Inc., not out of *revanchisme*. It is simply because Japan is out of control, is not subject to the guiding authority of any person, party, or paraphernalia. Japan is a missile, fuelled by aimless devotion to the system which it represents and of which it is constituted. Launched at random, it is unfortunately likely to hit some sensitive target, probably in North America.

Mr van Wolferen concludes, a trifle tamely, that there may be some way of reaching some sort of settlement with this phoenix on automatic pilot. This will call for a high degree of skill on the part of other governments. But, in creating a new image or myth of Japan, Mr van Wolferen seems to be reverting to an uncomfortable degree of unique-

ness in his analysis. He seems also to be removing from the Japanese any responsibility for the future. The book's principal thesis is its least convincing feature.

This thesis—that Japan lacks a necessary centre of accountable power—seems in itself to justify the arguments made in the other books noticed above, about the need for comparative studies in work which is designed to promote international understanding. Japan is a democracy, and its Constitution has provision for the checks and balances associated with systems of social and governmental organisation of this genre: the separation of powers is essential to it. Are we to understand that in this instance each check is too finely balanced? Where exactly are the centres of accountable power in other democracies?

Mr van Wolferen rates very poorly the status and as it were the vitality of the individual, as such, in Japanese society. The people are oppressed, enslaved by the impersonal system which has imposed itself upon them. Just as the social scientists are escaping from the group model, in their re-examination of contemporary Japan, Mr van Wolferen has chosen to resuscitate it. But if he cannot allow the bureaucracy to run the country, nor the industrialists, still less the politicians, perhaps he ought to give the job back to the people, rather than create his own System. Recent events in Japan suggest that the social scientists may be on the inside track. We might even conclude that jargon was better than Juggernaut. We could do worse than put our money on Colonel Isobé's successors, the unpretentious people, especially if they manage to acquire a very slightly less reticent dignity.

ACCORDING TO THE Constitution of Japan, sovereign power resides with the people, whose unity is symbolised by the Emperor. The Emperor also symbolises the State, but he derives his position from the will of the people. It is a matter of historical interpretation how far the new Constitution may have changed things effectively, at this level, for the idea of a constitutional monarchy reaches back into the early Meiji period. Outside Japan, the role of the late Emperor—the Shōwa Emperor—remains a matter of some controversy. Here again, revisionists are at work.

Edward Behr in *Hirohito: Behind the Myth*,<sup>4</sup> has set out to correct the balance, as he puts it, of that version of the Shōwa Emperor's role which has found general acceptance. Unfortunately, he has little, if any, new evidence to put forward which naturally conflicts directly with that version, and therefore has to rely heavily on interpretations of mostly familiar material. His technique I find unconvincing. He writes, for example, about the Emperor's "ineffectual and, almost certainly, deliberately half-hearted verbal reservations" about the militarists' plans for action in Manchuria and China. It is doubtful whether either the militarists' methods, or the extent, even the nature, of the problems which these methods posed for their critics in Japan 60 years ago have yet been fully understood. It is certain that Mr Behr cannot know what was in the Emperor's mind or heart at that time (or at any other).

He makes a great deal of such well-known episodes as General Tojo's later qualification of his remark before the

<sup>3</sup> *The Enigma of Japanese Power*. By KAREL VAN WOLFEREN. Macmillan, £16.95.

<sup>4</sup> *Hirohito: Behind the Myth*. By EDWARD BEHR. Hamish Hamilton, £15.95.

International Military Tribunal that no Japanese subject would go against the will of His Majesty. This had an obvious technical significance in the court, but what it illustrated above all was the extent to which Tojo, like other totalitarians of that period, had become the prisoner of his own propaganda. Myths created by those who manipulated the Emperor-system may have very little connection with the Emperor, or none at all.

In truth, what lies behind whatever image you may have of the late Emperor, when you have also consulted the work of Professor Takeda,<sup>5</sup> and that of the established authorities, such as Professors Beasley and Storry, is an expanse of ignorance; but this is not ignorance in the sense of lack of learning: it is simply an absence of knowledge. This is one of history's empty quarters. It is not an area populated by all those whom Mr Behr would apparently wish to believe had been either seduced or bought. It is an area in which something very closely akin to the reticence of Colonel Isobé's dignity may have an honourable place.

It would not be right, however, to risk the imputation that Colonel Isobé was some kind of Sphinx. On the contrary, on

the occasion of our last meeting he was perfectly explicit. He was as eager as ever to listen for one's linguistic mistakes and solecisms, his head cocked slightly to right (promising) or left (not so good), his lips at the half-purse. His outer clothing, ranging from dark fawn to dry bracken in colour, suggested a retired infantry officer experimenting with cavalry twill and cut; and parry, too, if challenged.

Sensing that he regarded me as a graduate (if as yet not of language, then possibly now of life), I congratulated him on the achievement of his state of conservation, and enquired whether there was a secret to it, which he might be willing to share with one no longer far from needing its reassurance. Colonel Isobé looked about him cautiously. Apparently seeking cover for a special confidence, he beckoned me towards a suitably isolated clump of azaleas, by which we might be shielded in privacy briefly from the crowd gathered on the lawn.

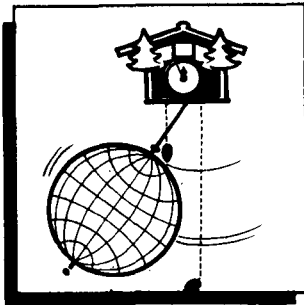
He confided in me that the secret of healthy longevity was an inheritance. Isobé was one of the ancient names: its bearers were the people of the sea-shore, as old as the rocks among which they dwelt. "It is simple", he said. "You must walk three miles every day."

He cocked his head back, to make certain that his message had been received: and burst into a smile of encouragement. "It is very simple", he repeated.

<sup>5</sup> Professor Kiyoko Takeda, *The Dual Image of the Japanese Emperor* (Macmillan, 1988).

## The Elephant & the Chickens?

*German Dilemmas—By ROGER MORGAN*



GERMANY, in this spring and summer of 1989, has been the scene of a number of strange and striking events. 1989, we should recall, is the year that has brought the fortieth anniversaries of the Federal Republic, of the DDR, and of NATO; the fiftieth anniversary of the start of the

War which ended with Germany's downfall and partition; and—while we are at it—the hundredth anniversary of the Second Workers' International, which vainly hoped that international socialism would abolish international war. Let us even recall another event with an anniversary in 1989—the French Revolution, whose many effects included the stirring-up of European patriotisms and nationalisms to a point where "the German Question" soon assumed a prominence and a potential for trouble which have been with us ever since. It has in fact been remarkable how much German media discussion there has been this year of the impact of the French Revolution on the German nation.

In the public life of the Federal Republic, the prelude to

this year of anniversaries was an incident arising directly from yet another of them: the fiftieth anniversary, in November 1988, of the horrific pogrom of 1938 known as the *Reichskristallnacht*. Philipp Jenninger, the Speaker of the *Bundestag*, had to resign from his post after making a well-intentioned but grossly ill-presented memorial speech: a speech which, in exploring the historical reasons for German anti-Semitism, finished up by at least appearing to suggest that *tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner*. 1989 thus began with sensitive Germans particularly aware of the tense and problem-laden relationships between past, present, and future.

Other dramatic events soon followed. Within a few months, elections in West Berlin and in Frankfurt had seen the overthrow of the incumbent Christian Democratic administrations and their replacement by the Left; worse still, from Chancellor Kohl's point of view, the new Social Democratic mayors depended on the support of the radical Green Party, hitherto virtually excluded from public office (and in Berlin, the Greens or "Alternatives" took several key jobs in the new city government). Then, in the elections for the European Parliament in June, the Social Democrats lost slightly, and the Christian Democrats very heavily, both to the Greens and to a much more alarming new force on