

# Keeping Up With Japan



by Theodore Dalrymple

Everyone lives in his own little world and unless he makes a special effort from time to time to enlarge it, there is a tendency with age for it to collapse in on itself and become yet smaller. It is for this reason that I sometimes read the *Japan Times*, for otherwise that country would not be on my horizon at all, despite its undoubted importance.



My view of Japan is full of clichés, if not entirely composed of them. I think of it as a very well-ordered place where there is little crime and no litter, where everyone has a refined aesthetic sense and makes the utmost use of space, and where politeness is universal. The women dress in kimonos and spend their days on the tea ceremony. Japan is also, in my imagination, stiflingly conformist.

It was therefore with some surprise that I read the main stories of the *Japan Times* for 5th January. The first had the headline *Body found in suitcase along Tama River in Kawasaki: Police open murder probe after 46-year-old man is discovered.*

Bodies found in suitcases are usually an indication that something is wrong, but I did not think that such suitcases were ever found in Japan. Whoever was responsible was, at the least, not deeply conformist.

The next story was that of a man in Tokyo who pushed a woman onto a railway line.

*A 39-year-old man was arrested Saturday for pushing an unacquainted woman off the platform onto the rail track at Tokyo's JR Shinagawa Station.... The man from Osaka Prefecture has admitted to the charge of attempted murder saying that he wanted to spend the rest of his life behind bars, said the police who withheld his name citing a mental disorder.*

The desire to shut myself away from the world occurs to me from time to time, though it is true that I generally think of other ways of becoming a hermit than pushing old ladies onto railway lines. I don't think the desire to be shut away is in itself a sign of a mental disorder, rather it is a sign of world-weariness. Perhaps the man in the story wanted to have his cake and eat it: He wanted to shut himself away, but also wanted to be clothed and fed. Looking after oneself, after all, is a problem for hermits.

Having worked in a prison, I soon came to the conclusion that the only way in which imprisonment would be tolerable for me would be in solitary confinement. Not to be able to get away from other people, especially those not chosen by myself, would be for me a kind of torture. Enforced socializing is a terrible thing.

Where pushing people on Tokyo platforms is concerned, I conjure up in my mind's eyes photographs from the 1960s, when men in uniforms with white gloves pushed crowds of commuters into the carriages of the Tokyo subway, squeezing them in until a tin of sardines would seem like a *fête champêtre* by comparison. I don't know whether this is still done.

I thought that it was only in North America and western Europe that schizophrenics under treatment, in what is laughingly called "the community," which is usually to say neglect, and under the influence of illicit drugs, push people from station platforms into the path of oncoming trains. I shall now have to revise my prejudices, which is always a painful thing to have to do.

The third story was about unmarried people in Japan aged between their 20s and 40s:

*More than a third of unmarried adults in their 20s to 40s have never been in a relationship and one fourth have no intention of ever getting married... Of respondents [to a survey of 1,200 of unmarried Japanese of that age]...19.4% of woman and 23.7% of men said having a romantic relationship is a waste of time and money.*

It would be interesting to know what these people would consider *not* a waste of time or money. I presume that they are not all scholars whose study of, say, Pali texts cannot be interrupted by domestic chitchat or candlelight dinners.

What the article does not tell us, unfortunately, is the

percentage of people in the 20s to 40s in Japan who remain unmarried, and therefore what is the social significance of the survey's findings, which clearly would be very different if the percentage were high than if it were low. But it is interesting that the article uses the words *married* and *unmarried*, in the way that they might have been used in the West in the 1950s, when it was still possible without irony for a musical, *High Society*, to have a song whose lyrics included the lines:

*Love and marriage, love and marriage,  
Go together like a horse and carriage.*

At any rate, the article hints at (though does not prove the existence of) a society in which radical social isolation and loneliness are common and, as other statistics quoted suggest, are becoming more common. No wonder the Japanese have so few children. Not only is the population of Japan growing older on average, but it will also soon be shrinking—as will the population of many other countries. Having come to maturity when it was widely held that overpopulation made famine and starvation in the near future inevitable, I cannot help but wonder whether this is an altogether bad thing, even though I know that the doomsday predictions of the time were all proved not only wrong, but almost the opposite of the truth. The fact is that falsities absorbed in one's youth leave a trace in one's mind, however much one tries to clear them out.

One might gather from reading the *Japan Times* in desultory fashion, as I do, that the country is a sink of political crisis, corruption, murder, and growing social problems. Our conception of the rest of the world is inevitably refracted through some lens or other, and because it is the unusual and sensational that interest us rather than the banal and everyday, it is the former that is related to us by various media. One picture, said Mao Tse-Tung, is worth a thousand words; one body in a suitcase is worth more (to a newspaper)

that the 70,000,000 Japanese who went to work the same day.

There might still be something to my stereotype of Japan, then. What is truth, said jesting Pilate, and would not stay for an answer.